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**A TASTE OF FIRE**

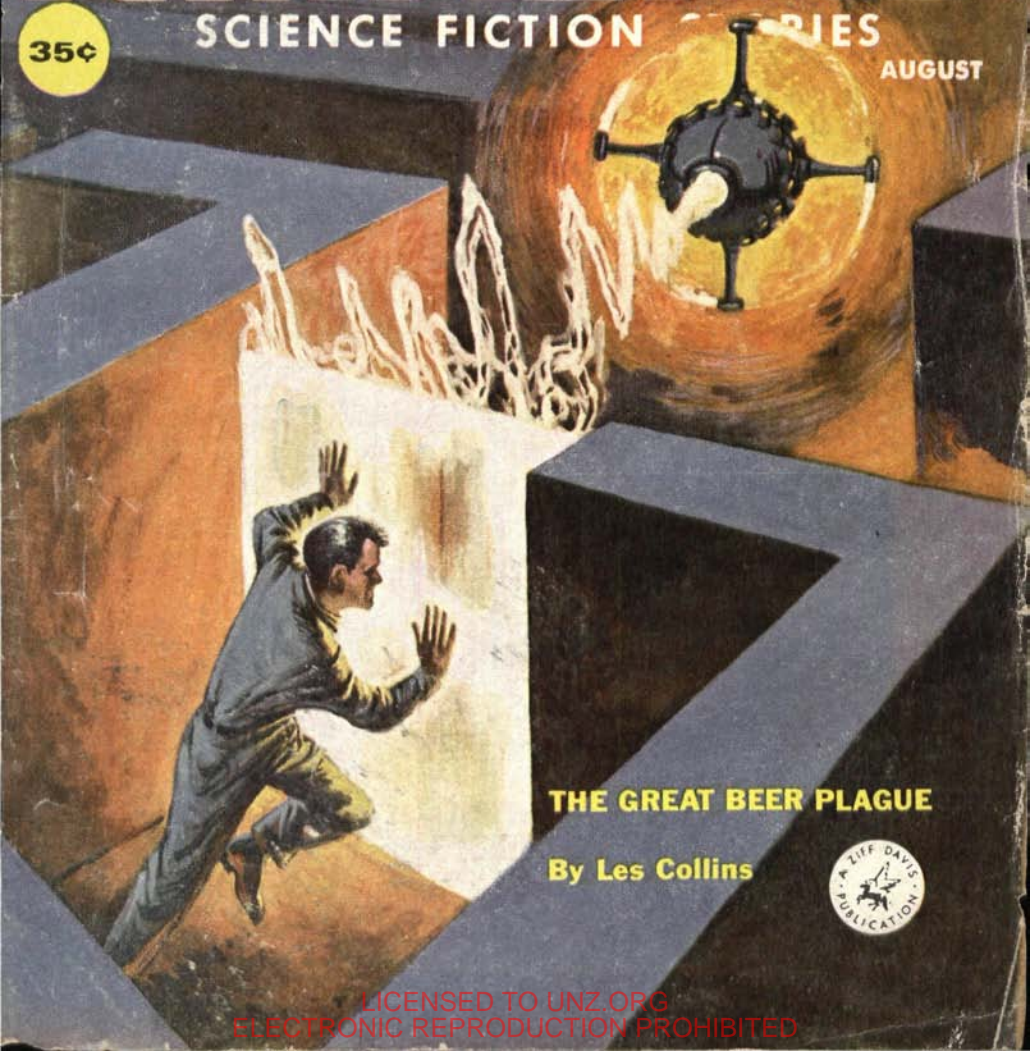
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AUGUST



**THE GREAT BEER PLAGUE**

**By Les Collins**



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# AMAZING

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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AUGUST

1959

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Number 8

**Publisher**

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NORMAN M. LOBSENZ

**Editor**

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SID GREIFF



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# E d i t o r i a l

IT WAS only a small item in the newspapers, and you had to have sharp eyes to see it. But it **was** one of the most startling and original theories in years, and **we** thought you'd like to hear about it.

Like many startling things these days, it came out of Russia. In an interview in, no less, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a leading Soviet mathematical physicist calmly postulated the theory that the two moons of Mars—Deimos and Phobos—are actually artificial satellites put into orbit by a long-since-extinct intelligent race of Martians.

The scientist, a Dr. I. Shklovskiy, adduced some hard-to-rebut evidence for his flight of astronomical fancy. First, he said, the “moons” of Mars are different in their physical attributes from the known moons of any other planet. They are much smaller than any other satellite. And they are much closer to the parent planet.

Secondly, the Russian pointed out, no other natural moon in the universe known to us moves in an orbit as unusual as Phobos'. But the man-made satellites we on Earth have put into space follow closely the same kind of erratic-patterned orbit.

Phobos weighs about 100,000,000 tons. But, said the scientist, the power to rocket such a mass into orbit was probably not beyond the abilities of the race that may have flowered on Mars many millions of years ago.

Dr. Shklovskiy did not pursue his thoughts to the next logical step: That perhaps the Martians, having successfully launched their monstrous moons, applied the same technique to spaceships, and escaped from their dying planet by jumping across the void to their nearest neighbor.

Marsniks, anyone?—NL

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# THE GREAT BEER PLAGUE

By LES COLLINS

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*Well, you take a stubborn geologist, a  
beautiful girl, a fault in space-time,  
and what do you expect to get? Oil?*

**R**ECIPE for madness: the basic ingredient is a young man — Jerry Leader — endowed with intelligence and empathy, trained in the earth sciences.

Mix well with: a flaw in the space-time continuum, little green men, and the girl Jerry wanted to marry, Irene Murray.

Bake for: one hot August week in southern California.

Result: Jerry about to lose his job and his girl, ruin the economy of a state, disrupt the national defense program, serve time in Leavenworth, and lose several million dollars he didn't have.

For a week now, every single oil well in California had been producing nothing but beer, ale, and stout. The young geologist — with a gene pattern like none other on earth — honestly felt the mess wasn't his fault. That was

because up to a few days ago, Jerry was lacking normal aggression.

And now he had only 15 minutes left in which to set matters straight. His shirt soaked with perspiration from the Friday-afternoon Bakersfield heat, Jerry stood alone on the drilling platform and stared at the well — *his* well — that was supposed to have proved his ability. Then he looked at the group watching him, and despite the heat, shivered.

They were still there: the innocuously ominous government agents, the admiral, Jerry's boss, Jerry's party chief, and Irene. Quite a collection. The young man wished he was sure of this desperation, last-ditch try. The smell of stale beer annoyed him. Why, Jerry wondered, couldn't this well have completed as an expensive-type brew?

As a geologist, Jerry couldn't be expected to understand the mechanics of ruptured continuua. Nor could he know the beer issuing so frothily from California wells *was* his fault. He didn't even realize the little green men were not green.

But Jerry Leader did recall the monstrous chain of events leading to his appearance—a sort of command performance—at this well where the trouble started, where his hopes went down in a spray of alcoholic foam.

It had been that evening last week. Irene asked him to dinner, and he couldn't refuse her. Unfortunately, she was George Murray's daughter. Murray not only was the oil company's executive vice-president, but also he preferred another suitor. Cozy situation.

During the meal, Jerry complimented his boss on certain new-land acquisitions. According to geological and geophysical surveys, the new lands were worthless—and everyone in the company knew it. Murray was not happy with the reminder of his mistake.

After Jerry left, Murray grumbled, "I thought Leader was a good geologist. Doesn't he read the reports?"

"Dad," Irene's eyes glinted amusement, "*you* believed the land good."

"That was before, not after. Hasn't that fool sense enough to use hindsight?"

"If Jerry still thinks the land

is good, it is. He's a fine geologist."

Her father sarcastically asked, "Are you capable of judging?"

"I've heard it; they say Jerry is natural-born to geology, that he has a one-in-a-million instinct, that he makes love to sub-surface strata.

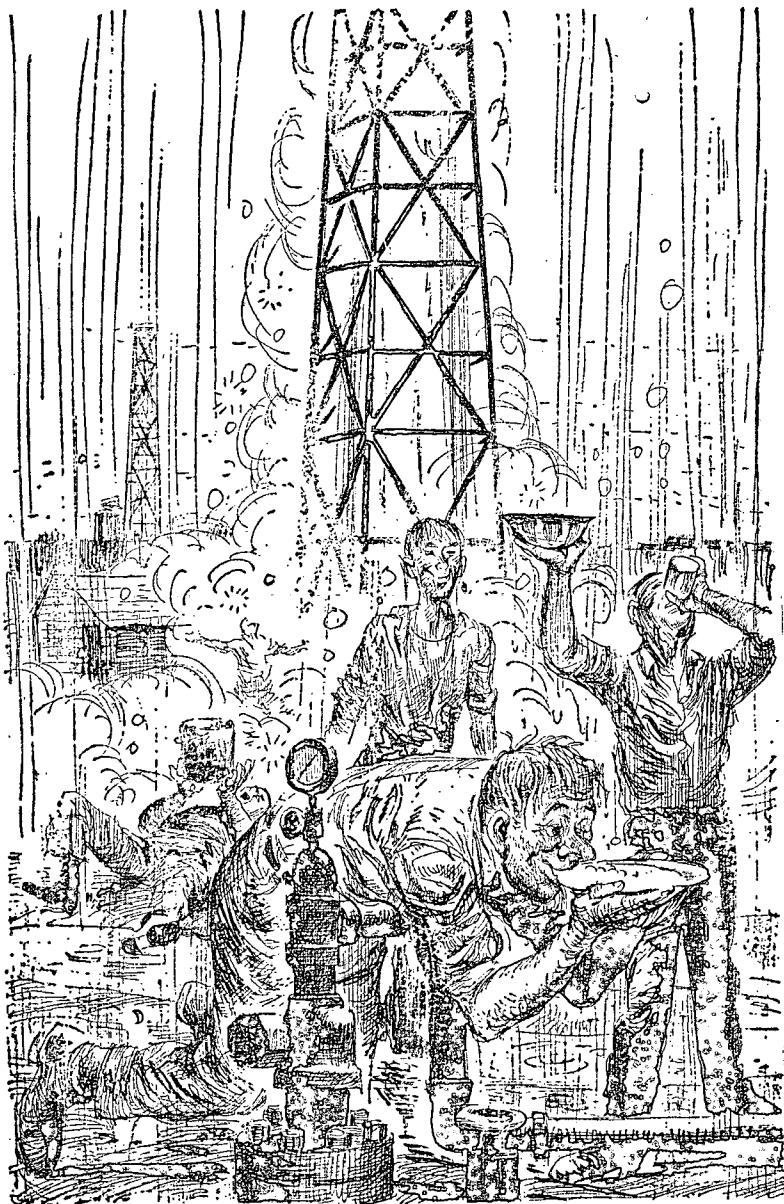
"Speaking of love," Murray remained unimpressed, "you haven't picked that nonentity?"

"No-o-o." But her reply was drawn out, not positive.

"Good, because I think Leader won't be with us very long." When he spoke the words; Murray didn't notice the set of his daughter's lips or the way her expression changed from amusement to stubbornness and perhaps a little determination.

Glumly, Jerry dialed long distance from Bakersfield and waited for the call to Irene. Murray had assigned him to Ray Summers' party; Jerry became a lone Christian on a vast Colosseum floor crowded with lions. Summers was competent enough to hold his job and wise enough to chew up any possible claimants to it. Worse, Summers was Murray's fair-haired selection for Irene. Worse worse, he knew Jerry was his competition. Worstest worse, Jerry was now behind the 8-ball that covered the X that marked the spot.

When Irene answered, Jerry said, "I'll have to break our date tonight." Frustrated, he unthinkingly continued in jargon, "Have to sit on a well."



Working this strike was a beer guzzler's dream.



"To keep it from being a gusher?"

He despaired on understanding her; she'd been associated with petroleum geology long enough to know what he meant. That's all he ever got, wells. Why didn't they give him exploratory work? Then he'd show what he knew!

"Jerry?"

"Sorry, I was thinking. It means I have to log the well, to be there from 24 to 36 hours, keeping a record of important strata drilled through."

"You should have called me sooner."

"Couldn't, 'Rene. Had to study the area. One mistake and I'm—"

Intuitively suspicious, she interrupted, "Did my dad give you a 'real chance'? Are you assigned to Summers?" Jerry's silence was confirmation; Irene grew furious. "Dad ran all over you. Why didn't you tell him to go take a—"

Hastily, Jerry cut in. "May I call you when I get back to town?"

And then she grew more angry: "Say you'll call; don't ask!"

The geologist was hurt, not knowing Irene's anger was directed at her father. Mentally, he vowed to find some way of proving his worth. This firmly set the Murray-Irene-Summers-Jerry interaction; consequently, a major industry, California, and the Federal Government descended with malice aforethought—simply because Jerry

brought in a well that pumped beer.

He wasn't to know this until each of the segments were in place. After the call, he drove to the assigned area. Summers' face shimmered and danced in the heat crinkles off the car's hood. Summers, patronizing, deliberately humiliating him . . . Keep the drilling going, Leader, until you hit Vaqueros shales; there's production in the Vedder sands . . . What idiot wouldn't know that, Summers? . . . Let's get it straight right now, Leader: I'm party chief. Do nothing until you've checked with me . . . And another thing: no beer, Leader—

At the memory of the words, Jerry downshifted viciously. He still couldn't believe Summers' pronounced sentence of doom in the heat. Beer goes with geologists as traditionally as matzoh-ball soup with Passover. Reaching the well, Jerry changed from angry young man to geological computer. He checked the ditch as a matter of course. Robot-like, his eye recognized formations in the mass. Shales, limestones, a few foraminifera—*Pulvinulina*, he correctly guessed. Nothing exciting so far.

Then he went to the Barium Mud Corporation trailer. These jobs always fascinated him: they were like indescribable Hollywoodana, with flashing neons for gas tests, black lights for oil, electronic recorders (modified Brown type), and—of course—bunks for the geolo-

gists. Briefly, he thought about applying for work with Barium, then abandoned the idea.

He found time to kid the two Barium geologists, Art and Mac, and to make the invariable jokes about the core-house. But when he got there, he was again serious. The core-house was a temporary shack in which an entire record of well-cores was kept: samples, carefully labeled, in the correct stratigraphic sequence. These proved his first approximation—nothing important had been hit—was correct.

Outside, he watched the driller working in a sun already too hot. Jerry'd be missing beer before the day was out—

"Mister!" Art's head was sticking out the trailer door. "Mister, watcha doing? Some of that there geology work?"

Smiling, Jerry replied with a universally recognized sign of approbrium, and sat down in what little shade there was.

Several hours later, it had grown even hotter, and the drill bit was still chewing into Zemorrian-stage rocks. Jerry, too, had grown hotter, still chewing on recent events. He resented the beer-ban most of all. Several times, in defiance, he conjured up a non-emptying, ice-cold bottle of beer. Now, in an orgy of masochistic, delicious torture, he was about to imagine how good it would taste.

"Breakthrough!"

The shout brought him to his feet, and he raced toward the

drilling rig. The barium men spilled from the trailer; the three met a few paces from the well.

"Drill dropped suddenly," the driller explained. "Must have hit another sand."

"Give me 20 feet of core," Jerry said, then turned to the others. "We're offsetting Union Oil's Fee 87 well. What was its completion depth?"

"Less than this," answered Art. "You must be due."

Mac commented grimly, "Or else you've got a dry hole."

Finally, the driller began laying out the core in 3-foot lengths. Cylindrical, hot, it had been torn from the earth two miles below them. The Barium men had the black light ready; Jerry, again a machine, needed but one glance. The dingy brown rock fluoresced a beautiful green: it meant oil, lots of oil.

Jerry squinted in thought. "Wonder what the drift was. If only I knew for sure—"

"Hey!" Mac interjected, "don't do any more to the well. Summers will tear you to pieces."

Jerry ignored him, still thinking deeply.

"Raw hamburger," said Art, "he's been eating raw—"

"Give me as much counter-angle as you can," the young geologist said to the driller, "and drill another 50 feet." This well had the earmarks of a big producer. Here was the chance to show Irene and her father. Unknowingly, Jerry did—he would soon hit the continuum flaw.

The driller, startled, began to speak, shrugged, went back to work.

Jerry Leader, the emotional Jerry, knew the significance of the shrug; alone, he'd made the decision that would result in victory or defeat. It was the moment he'd been trained for; in a few seconds, he'd called on all his knowledge and experience.

If the drilling went past the thickness of oil-bearing sand and if water then flooded in, the project was a complete loss. No man can risk a half-million worth of well without qualms, especially when he can play it safe.

Perspiration gathered on his brow; rivulets trickled down around his eyebrows to his cheeks. Time did not slow for him—it ceased to exist. Literally ceased, he was to discover later, but aliens are aliens are little green men, and *they* weren't about to tell him.

Finally, the Barium guys were saying he had a terrific well, congratulations, what a lucky stiff! Jerry ignored them, for he was surprised by strange thoughts he had; seemed almost spoken. When Jerry had faux-pas'd about the newly acquired lands, Murray implied the company would sell the oil rights cheaply. If these thoughts were correct, he could get the land. And though the thoughts had never been so strong, Jerry realized they were what he'd been calling his instinct.

He was almost right.

Summers was phoned the news and arrived later; Art and Mac had insisted on a celebration and split their cache, in the portable icebox, with Jerry. He was feeling very good indeed.

"What's all this nonsense, Leader?" Summers demanded. Then he saw the empty beer cans. "You'd better explain those!" he roared his best executive roar, "I told you not to drink beer, Leader, in the interests of The Team. You're always breaking orders. The company cannot endure creeping individualism."

When he'd run down, Jerry blinked at him, suddenly conscious Summers was only a man. "My well isn't nonsense. There are some new samples waiting your inspection. Why the devil don't you check them instead of yelling."

Art, looking at Mac, silently formed the words "Raw hamburger!"

The party chief snapped: "I did, and the gunk doesn't look like oil. Prove it."

They went to the fresh cores, Summers triumphant, Jerry a little shaken. He examined a specimen. No oil-shows—none! Definitely none.

Summers checked. "Doesn't even smell like oil." He sniffed the rock again, then touched his tongue to it. Wildly, he shouted, "Leader, you drunken idiot! This gag will get you canned."

"What's the matter?"

"Matter?" snarled the party

chief, fists balled menacingly, "This isn't oil. It's beer!"

The petroleum world in California habitually reads a daily trade paper, the Munger Oilogram. Munger gives accurate, timely information—as much as the various companies will release—on the progress of wells being drilled. The Monday morning following Jerry's fiasco, the Oil Industry read of his well. It read of his "beer showings," and laughed at the joke in the staid publication. Depending on proximity to Jerry, segments of the industry laughed, chuckled, smiled, and—in a few cases—acted with sobriety.

Jerry alone took it seriously; he couldn't understand what happened, but he knew it wasn't an elaborate practical joke.

Summers didn't take the beer well seriously, but he treated it in a grave manner: his rival was exactly where he wanted him. Jerry sweated out the week-end, with stern orders to be in Murray's Los Angeles office Monday afternoon. The young man would be fired.

He wasn't, but only because Murray couldn't be reached. The VP was in conference.

At 11 A.M., Standard Oil's 882-28B, always a heavy producer, began pumping a clear, cold, light-gravity beer with no percentage of waste—the head was left in the well. Oil-field workers came from all over, volunteering. Standard ordered the well shut-in, pending further de-

velopments. In the industry, this is known as "cogitating."

That same afternoon, Ohio Oil's Tulare Fee 46 was completed. Somebody misjudged the mud column, and the well completed as a blowout, a gusher. All over the Valley, spectators watched a great yellow stream climb 100 feet up, with a white, bubbly froth formed at the zenith. The froth then dispersed as minute droplets that drifted slowly in the direction of Buena Vista Lake. Pelicans there were later observed acting in a most peculiar fashion. Three WCTU members were arrested for drunken driving, unfortunate victims of the fallout.

The same strangeness occurred all over California. From the old fields of Los Angeles, through the hot areas in Monterey County, to the Rio Vista gas field near Sacramento, the wells produced beer.

Beer from the gas fields, so light it almost wasn't a liquid; varicolored beer, ranging from yellow to light brown, produced in the northern San Joaquin Valley; green beer, green in color and taste, from the Los Angeles Basin; and all of this beer was as cold as though it had been in a refrigerator.

There were exceptions. Tide-water's Hill 15 gave forth a thick, heavy, dark-brown stout that no one wanted to try. Trico's 71-12 pumped 92 barrels of weird-tasting ale.

By Tuesday morning, the entire Oil Industry was saddled

with two types of headache: that common to the field workers—who'd enjoyed getting theirs—and the anxiety type common to the professionals in the offices. Laughter no longer: try to understand a phenomenon with no rational explanation.

Summers' headache was parochial. Having returned to his apartment to sulk, he was unaware of developments and couldn't understand why Murray refused to see him.

Jerry had his, too. He'd closeted himself with books to study the problem and didn't know it was statewide. Feeling guilty that he had in some way caused the beer well—and he had—he began pouring over his texts, going back to such basics as "Shaft Sinking Under Difficult Conditions" and "Miocene Stratigraphy of California."

That day's Munger carried the usual number of wells; however, all data about them were contained in the single word "cogitating." One of the typists on the Munger staff broke under the strain of repetition.

Each oil company guards knowledge with a jealous efficiency that would make the FBI turn green. Before any information can be released, 13 wheels must initial it, having ascertained that it was previously published in a government geological bulletin.

Thus, for example, when the Munger reporter interviewed Shell's two scouts, Merier and

Klouse, he found these gentlemen tight-lipped. So much so, all they would say was, "Cogitating." The scouts had been told not to speak on pain of being boiled in beer.

The news did not reach the outside world. Around the fields, naturally, there were rumors, but no one was willing to loose a completely fantastic story or be the instigator of a riot.

However, though the news wasn't in the public domain, it did reach ears not commonly associated with petroleum. Several friendly tavern owners cancelled upcoming beer deliveries. Distributors couldn't believe that normally heavy consumption would suddenly cease; tactful investigations revealed the terrible truth. Within hours, every national and local brewer had quite accurate reports.

Shortly thereafter, the TV networks heard rumors that many favorite perennial reruns, the fights, and the late late movies would no longer be sponsored by beer. This caused an agonizing reappraisal of television in general.

Hollywood, almost in the midst of oil fields, quite typically got the news from New York via Milwaukee. The motion-picture industry, realizing TV's plight, suddenly began planning many more of the same old pictures. It became a fight between motion pictures and television, a scramble for material. Thus, three mediocre writers sold their first screen plays—and attributed



success to talent rather than Jerry Leader. The writers hadn't the faintest idea of Jerry's existence; even if they had, they wouldn't have given him credit.

British intelligence reported movement of several Russian divisions to the south, and Turkey and the NATO nations were alerted. Interestingly enough, the Russian troops stopped short of the border, encamping at the Baku oil fields.

An Arabian potentate, being wooed by a Russian commission, took a hurried trip to his wells. An alert American newsman reported that the potentate looked eagerly at the product he was pumping, then sighed and said dolefully, "Oil . . . nothing but oil."

On Wednesday, Munger suspended publication for the first time since 1919. The industry was too busy cogitating to read the trade paper.

The heads of the leading oil companies met late Wednesday afternoon. Wofingtown of Standard called the conference and, between nervous and hurried gulps of coffee, forthrightly broke the no-longer fantastic news. Moreover, he knew the others, too, were getting only beer.

Michell, Union Oil, dropped his miltown into his coffee when he heard that; Westin of Richfield dropped his coffee into his lap. The others relaxed; now they could be honest and all work together for a solution.

Hours later, they had no solution; when Honolulu Oil's representative, Hansing, suggested the one thing they *could* do was get drunk on beer, he was nearly stoned to death with tranquilizers.

Very, very early Thursday morning, they decided to call in the government—obviously a desperation move. To their surprise, they found the government was trying to see them at the same moment.

Admiral Block had arrived from Washington the evening before and spent his time unsuccessfully searching for these very men. Now he entered the room, his face black with anger, his manner precise, abrupt.

"The. Elk. Hills. Oil. Field," he said, punctuating each word, "in United. States. Naval. Petroleum. Reserve. Number. One, is, producing. ale. *Ale*, gentlemen, and this is the U. S. Navy, not—God forbid!—the British. The Navy is aware that California wells are pumping beer and products in the beer family. Don't you realize National Security is threatened? Why have you stopped producing oil?"

They stared at him, open-mouthed. The Admiral held up a hand. "Is Mr. Murray present?"

Murray acknowledged.

"Good. This began with you."

"Imposs—" Murray started to shout, then saw the Admiral's face. It was not the Navy Way to shout at an Admiral. "I mean, I don't have any such knowledge."

"The ONI traced the first oc-

currence to a well of yours drilled near Bakersfield."

Murray thought for an instant, then leapt to his feet. "Leader! Son of a—Leader!"

"Leader? What leader?"

"Jerry Leader, one of my geologists. He was on that well."

The Admiral snorted. "Bring your Leader to me. The Navy must have its reserves." The officer took on a look of cunning. "Perhaps he's working for the atomics faction? Or—God forbid!—the Army?"

However, they couldn't find Jerry anywhere.

Confidently, the Admiral called ONI for an assist. By mid-morning, the President was contacted, and he assigned Army and Air Force intelligences the job. Late Thursday, the FBI went into action. Despite the Admiral's positive statement, Murray didn't believe Jerry was—God forbid!—an enemy agent. He felt sure of that much.

Finally permitted to go home, worn out after 36 sleepless hours, Murray mumbled the whole story to Irene when she questioned him. On Friday, Irene produced Jerry.

Friday morning, Admiral Block sat glumly in the corner of the room, receiving reports that Jerry could not be found. The others were more lively, discussing possibilities. They faced the contingency that oil was no longer available. Perhaps there wasn't any more. It would mean, of course, that the California oil

industry would have to convert into a beer industry.

They didn't know that the old beer industry had organized and come out of its corner fighting for life. The brewers were preparing a complaint, to be given to the FTC. The charges were restraint of trade, misleading and false advertising, formation of trusts, and adultery. Unknowing, the oil men were unworried—at least about legal aspects—and continued their line of thought.

"We could," said Wofingtown, "re-educate through advertising. Tremendous campaign. In the East, we could go to red, white, and blue, Esso beer cans."

Michell nodded soberly. "And Phillips 66 certainly could put across the idea that this was the 66th blend tried."

Hansing added. "It might work at that. Imagine, all over the nation, billboards with such slogans as 'The Most Powerful Beer You Can Drink' or 'We Have *Cleaner* Beer Rooms.'"

"That's my province!" snapped Wofingtown of Standard.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen," interrupted Westin. "We can't ignore the present beer industry. What about all the people who'd be thrown out of work? Can't upset the economy."

Murray was passed a note: Summers was still waiting for him outside. He ignored it, listened with continued interest. Finally, he saw a solution to the problem. "I have it. We could take all the beer people in, and

make them TV announcers for the fights or baseball. After all, now we'll have to start sponsoring a great many TV shows."

They congratulated him. And had his statement reached the outside world, the writers would have lost their sales while cursing Jerry's name, the movies and TV would have gone back to being as bad as ever, the beer industry would have dropped its complaint, and things would have settled back to normal. American beer would be the best in the world because it would be brewed by Nature herself.

The Admiral arose. "Now that you have saved the economy, what in hell are you going to do about the security? You seem to forget: we still need oil."

They glowered at this governmental interference; however, there was logic to what the man said.

Murray received another note: Irene wanted him urgently. He couldn't be disturbed. Another note: Irene threatened not to tell him where Jerry was. Murray was out of the conference room like a shot, into the outer office. There, Irene, Jerry, and Summers were all in a violent argument.

"Leader, where have you been?" he shouted. It quieted the arguing three; it did more. Admiral Block, hearing the stentorian roar, came out, followed by the others. Block took command.

"Which of the services brought

you here? ONI?" he asked hopefully.

"He was at the well, where your brains would never think to look," said Irene. "He was being a good geologist, trying to—"

Jerry interrupted. "Please Irene! I'll answer the Admiral." He said it quietly, in a tone she'd never heard. Irene shut her mouth with a snap.

Summers began: "I've been trying to see you all week, Mr. Murray—" And then he saw Jerry's expression and stopped talking.

"Miss Murray found me," Jerry finally said. "I was at the well, hoping to get some clue to this business. I'd just found out that the trouble was statewide. I had no idea of that."

"What, may I ask, were you doing till then?"

"Studying, trying to understand what had happened at my own well."

The Admiral vented a naval snort. "Studying—when we need action!"

Jerry looked at him evenly. "There's no need for sarcasm, Admiral."

Block turned red, and they braced themselves for the explosion. Jerry continued to look at him. And Block said, "Maybe you're right, Leader."

Jerry ignored the others' startled expressions, continued, "Yes, studying and thinking. Beer flowing from oil wells is not, strictly speaking, a geological problem. It requires unconven-

tional thinking and I am better equipped than most of you."

"That's for sure," interjected Murray, sarcastically.

Jerry nodded. "I've begun along the proper lines."

Block looked hopeful. "You have an answer?"

"Just a start. The idea is so oddball, I first rejected it. I don't now, if for no other reason than its simplicity. Has anyone considered that the occurrence of beer is not natural? Some agency must be responsible."

The Admiral waved a hand. "We're investigating the possibility of sabotage—"

"That isn't what I mean," said Jerry, "but don't ask what I *do* mean. There's an idea skirting around inside . . ."

"Unfortunately, Leader, the government can't wait for you to develop crackpot ideas. Come up with something in the next hour, or you'll be in Leavenworth faster than you know. There are laws against hurting government property."

"But *I* didn't do this . . . one hour? That's not enough—"

They sensed his confusion, the loss of the dominance he'd exerted a few moments before. Summers began insisting Jerry be fired. Irene looked at him strangely, pitying him, and it was galling.

And Murray: "There's nothing to recommend you, Leader. You have your notice. I should have fired you last week, when you began talking about the new land in such glowing terms."

Suddenly Jerry snapped his fingers. There was a broad grin on his face. "I'm fired? And you don't like that land?"

"You're fired, and for two cents, I'd sell . . . if I could find an idiot to buy."

"Here's your idiot," Jerry grinned even more broadly. "All rights for five thousand? I'd be more reasonable, but it's all I have."

"Agreed! Verbal contract, in the presence of witnesses!"

Block said, "You've made a bad bargain, Leader. You won't use that land for many years."

Jerry shook his head. "I can if you'll extend the limit to include travel time."

"Travel time? To where?"

"The well. I have your answer. Care to come along?"

Now, glancing at the group, Jerry saw the confusion on Murray's face, the smugness on Summers', the skepticism on Block's, the worry on Irene's, and innocent blankness on the agents'.

Heat waves reflected off the rig's metallic structure; the misty glare of the Valley in summer surrounded the well. In the background, seemingly at random, crowded oil fields thrust derricks into the air as though civilization had gone mad with a multipurposed Cleopatra's Needle fetish.

The Barium trailer was gone; Art and Mac had left a sign, neatly but simply lettered "Raw Hamburger." Jerry grinned,

then sobered. It might be his last grin for some time.

The rig was not operating. The geologist nervously backed away, and sat down beside the driller, sprawled out in the shade. "Hot, isn't it?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah." They both ignored the others.

"You're being paid to sit here?"

"And with no work to do," the driller nodded happily. "When it gets too hot, I go over there"—he pointed to a completed, producing well a quarter of a mile away—"and refresh myself. It's ice-cold, too." He burped a lusty testimonial.

"Well, the vacation is over. Let's get to work." Jerry stood up.

"Heat got you?"

"Nope. Run a rat-tail down through the mud packing to the bottom."

The driller just stared at him. "I got orders not to—"

"I'm countermanding. Get busy!"

It was that quiet tone—and the driller went to work.

Finally finished, he called, "Now what?"

The geologist pointed to the other well. "Go refresh yourself." After the driller left, Jerry climbed onto the platform, and stared down at the well. He was more than nervous; he was risking everything on a two-mile hole in the ground, just as he'd done a few days before.

Standing motionless with

churning insides wouldn't help. Either it worked or it didn't. "I don't know if the method is right," Jerry thought, still staring, "but you must be there."

He waited. There was no sign, no reply, only defeat. "The shorter, happy life of Jerry Leader," the geologist thought bitterly. "I must be batty—"

*you aren't, jerry. we're here; we've always been.*

Words in his head, he whirled back. "I don't understand!"

*don't shout-think! atrocious manner. nevertheless, you've an instinct. where did you get it?"*

"You've been helping me? Why me? I'm not as good as I thought, am I?"

*not so many questions at once, please. we helped in the beginning; now you've developed enough to go it alone—you are as good as you thought. however, any human brain has the capability for finding oil. when you develop the sense properly, all you do is go to the right spot and think about it. your brain will find it, right proper.*

*"as for helping, we didn't exactly pick you: we were stuck with you. because of your gene pattern, you're the only human we've ever been able to contact."*

Jerry tried to stifle the thought, Little Green Men!, by asking, "Who are you?"

*little green men. you deserved that—can't you avoid thinking in trite phrases? we are so tired of the label. we're people, of a sort, living across the galaxy.*



when you counterangled the drilling, you hit a flaw in the continuum. now we can reach you physically.

"I was right! You're responsible for the beer."

certainly. weren't you wishing for it all the time? we're easily as nice as you, jerry, so we gave it to you. besides, look at the fun it caused.

The young man wondered what a mental giggle thought like—the last statement seemed to be accompanied by one. Instead, he accused, "You planted the thoughts about the land; I remember having them strongly right after we brought in this well.

of course.

A smug thought, that; but Jerry was too anxious to finish the job. "I can't thank you enough; now turn off the beer and give us back the oil. It's rather important."

not so fast. in due time, we'll decide.

"Decide? Nothing to decide—there's only one answer!"

you're shout-thinking again. haven't you learned anything?

"Plenty!" Jerry continued in the same tone of mind. "Indiscriminate niceness is as harmful as anything else not done in moderation."

A new thought joined in: this character is improving. he got any more?

"Sure: be nice only to those who know how to respond. 'Illegitimus non carborundum' is a way of saying not to let 'em walk

all over you. I tried that—and you should see how they're snapping into line."

we have seen it; just wanted to be sure you knew what you'd done.

"Then, as long as the fun is over, return the oil!"

he's more than improved; he's ready.

correct: a parting thought, jerry. don't swing the other way and turn mean. balance niceness with aggression.

"Parting thought? I'd like to know you personally. Is there some way I can reach you?"

certainly there is, and earth will learn it someday, but not from us. we may be nice—this time it was definitely a mental grin—but we're not that nice!

"I hate to see you go; you've been with me for so long."

we'll check the kids every so often . . . if there are any. irene is wondering about you this very moment, and summer is there. get moving!

"Right!" Jerry spun back to the group, stopped, and returned to the well. "What about the oil?" But there was no answer. And when he climbed from the rig, the agents were waiting to march him to Admiral Block with no stops on the way.

"You don't realize it, Leader, but you're mentally ill. You stared at the well 15 minutes, doing nothing, hardly moving."

"True, but I did what I had to."

"Doing what?"

"Talking to—" Jerry broke off abruptly, apprehensively.

"To yourself? Or maybe the well?" Block shook his head. "That's what I mean, Leader."

Here it was, then. Could he be insane? Nevertheless, he had to go through with it, no matter what. Jerry swallowed the large geode that formed in his throat. And precisely at that moment, he recovered his earlier confidence, plunged ahead. "The oil will flow, Admiral." Mentally, he added, "If those cockeyed purple-people eaters come through!"

*right, jerry! the oil's being returned—you just won it. but how did you know we are purple?*

"When is it coming?" the Admiral demanded.

"Soon!" Jerry matched his commanding tones, then called to the girl, "Rene, come here."

She approached, flanked by Summers and her father. Timidly—for they'd worked on her—Irene asked, "Yes, Jerry?"

"Listen, if I'm crazy, it's like a fox. Shortly, I'll be in the oil business because your father kindly fired me and sold that land. Only proves that management should listen to its good technical help, at least occasionally. That's the first thing I wanted to tell you."

"There's more?"

He nodded. "I think you're lovely. Will you marry me?"

"I—I don't know, Jerry."

He sighed. "I do, but I guess I'll have to convince you." He did.

Murray said agitatedly, "Will someone stop that nut?"

Irene broke away, looked at her father. "It's too bad," she said dreamily, "that all men aren't nuts like this. Meet your son-in-law, Dad!"

Admiral Block said, "I hate to interrupt this celebration, but the United States Navy is still waiting."

Jerry frowned. "Can't understand what's taking them so long."

Murray questioned, "Them? Who?"

"Shouldn't that be 'they who?'" Jerry asked innocently.

"Heaven forbid!" Block shouted in exasperation, then shook his head, "He's hopeless—take him away."

With a roar that might have been associated with a detonated shell, the uncapped well erupted, blessed the forthcoming Union by spewing good, black, Standard oil all over.

Thus it was that Jerry Leader—intelligent, empathetic geologist—flawed the continuum, ended the little-green-man myth, and became the owner of a thriving oil business and father of twins.

Who had—God forbid!—gene patterns just like Jerry's.

THE END



*The world is made up of  
a number of things—love  
and hate, joy and sad-  
ness, fear and courage.  
And to man's progress,  
each is a . . .*

## CONTRIBUTING FACTOR

By ROY CARROLL

IT WAS a small thing in the totality of the universe; it was such a small thing in the U. S. space program that it was soon forgotten. Nevertheless, one man throwing his life away was a contributing factor, no matter how small, to that program.

How did William Thomson feel as he raced from the blockhouse toward death? The skeptics claim no man really believes he will die; probably Thomson was concentrating on his job and reacted automatically.

The bird was modified, of indeterminate ancestry: out of Convair by Douglas, with genes hinting strongly of Martin. She sat on the launching pad, the deck, and was beautiful in the morning sunlight. She was different; the vitally important last stage was a capsule that contained a man. Thomson had to reach her pad, for American prestige could not stand failure on this attempt to send a man into space. Yet, reaching the pad must be impossible. The lox tanks—liquid oxygen tanks—were overpressurized; the whole damned mess would go sky-high—but in pieces—at any millisecond. Impossible as it was, he had to do it.

You who are responsible for this test, hear the sob-sisters—forget the money, forget the

time, but: God help you if anything happens to the pilot!

Focus now on William Thomson, doing his job. Focus first on the broad perspective that stretched backward through time to a day 15 months before, when Thomson was on his first firing.

For 12 hours, they'd been on count. Thomson, monitoring the closed-loop TV link on vernial-rocket position, was excited. He was the new man in the block-house; the others restrained their feelings. Nonchalance, boredom, indifference—all these displayed, broken only by an occasional string of softly uttered oaths.

Thomson was tired. His eyes were bleary, swollen. But his mind, crackling with artificially induced alertness, refused to allow his body to sag. The bird had to go, she had to.

The test conductor's voice into the headset was multiplied, booming from a hundred—or a thousand—or a million—squawk boxes: "X minus two hours."

The work and preparation continued, through X minus 90 minutes to X minus one hour. Thomson felt tension increasing. And then, with pain like a knife in the stomach, came the news for all to hear. "Autonavigator to test conductor: autonavigator has problem, possibly extenuating, and would like to hold the count."

There was no change in the conductor's voice; it was still a flat, unyielding monotone. "X

minus one hour and holding. Autonavigator will advise test conductor if the count is to resume."

Disappointment beat at him, magnified by the relative quiet from the men around. Say something, damn you! Say anything—think of the tax dough coming out of your pockets. At 40,000 an hour, it cost us half-a-million-plus so far. If you haven't emotions, at least have pocket books!

A voice in back broke the silence: "The gyros won't cage—give 'em 30 minutes."

The weight was lifted from Thomson. There was even, he noticed, a certain relief in all of them. Twenty-eight minutes after the hold request, the squawk boxes returned to life: "Autonavigator to test conductor: count may be resumed."

The conductor raised an eyebrow, then continued. Someone else said, "Good!" So, Thomson thought, you guys aren't as cold and logical as the stereotype you're trying to portray.

But he was wrong and would discover it in the ensuing months. These men were used to firings; they were tired after weeks of preparation; they wanted one thing to happen: either let the bird leave the deck, or let her blow. The third possibility, an indefinite hold, meant they'd have to go through it all over again.

The count narrowed until, somehow, they were into the last

stage. The test conductor said, "X minus 30 seconds and holding for final check. Flight-control building?"

"Affirmative."

"Navigation?"

"Affirmative."

Thomson's heart began a peculiar *thump:beat, thump:beat*, and he couldn't swallow.

"Down-range tracking?"

"Affirmative."

"Telemetry?"

"Affirmative."

then:

"X minus 30 seconds and counting . . . X minus 20 seconds . . . X minus 10 seconds . . . nine, eight—"

"Helium sphere pressurized!"

"—four, three, two, one, fire!"

No noise from the bird yet, of course. Silence in here, too. Sweating men, trying to carry out theoretical simplicity with the practical, intensely complex. And Thomson, sick, waves of sickness.

"X plus five, X plus six—"

"Lox-tank pressure rising and closing on five, eight, ten—"

"X plus nine—"

"On 12—"

"X plus 10! *Now!*"

A burst of flame from her bottom, in answer to the command; a roar that built to a shrew's cry, proving her sex; a trembling like the traditional bride. Thomson trembled with her. And like the ice scaling off in big chunks, he was frozen.

"Umbilical one . . . two!" Part of his mind observed and knew; the umbilicals — cables that

brought in the power—were now disconnected.

Shouts around him, in orgasmic explosion: "Bear, get off the deck!"

"She's up! Keep moving, you little witch!"

She did keep moving—and then blew to hell at 1,000 feet.

Thomson still hadn't moved, hadn't spoken, even when he saw that a vernial was out of whack.

They chewed him; oh, did they chew him! It was reprimand, despite the fact he'd had nothing to do with it. The fuel lines had split and there'd been pre-ignition. Reprimand—yet deserved. If all else had gone right, but with the number two vernial improperly positioned, the bird would have flopped over.

Thomson took it, unable and unwilling to tell them of this fear. Fear that was irrational, nonsensical, blind. He'd ceased to function at the very moment for which he was trained.

It was the same sort of tragedy-comedy that dogged his life. He was an adult before he had a chance to take his first plane trip; he'd awaited the flight with eagerness bordering childish enthusiasm. And from the moment the DC-6 took off, Thomson felt the fear, was held white and motionless. He overcame it partially, enough to fly when he had to.

Even his marriage ceremony —eagerness building to the sudden fear, blurring out memory.

Then this first missile firing—



anticipation, the peak . . . and the cowardice that followed, leaving in him the taste of quinine bitterness.

One official reprimand was permitted; after that, he was through. Counter with his love for the birds, a love almost fanatical, and he would fight this thing within.

He won—again partially. In the following months, he restrained it, chained it, and none knew what it took from him. However, they felt that he was frightened, and because fear made them uncomfortable, they were politely contemptuous but never outspoken. They simply refused to accept him.

Thomson made no mistakes for 15 months, until the count began on the biggest of them all to date: MIS, Man In Space.

Earlier, the test conductor had looked at him questioningly. "Thomson?"

It was the first time there'd ever been surface inference. But he had to be in on this; not trusting his voice, he nodded assurance to the conductor. It satisfied him.

Immediately after, Thomson began to wonder. What if he failed and, in failing, caused the bird and the man within to die? Was it selfishness? Was it just to be able to say that he'd been an integral part of the first successful MIS launching?

No! It's part of getting one of us outside. It must be.

Must it? gibbered the idiot,

the fear-thing that lurked in its mental chains.

The count continued through the night. On the closed-loop TV link, Thomson barely heard the softly uttered oaths, the hums and clicks and whines of equipment fashioned in the image of Electronics. His eyes were bleary, swollen, but he felt alert enough. It seemed as though they'd been at it forever, yet it was only 13 hours.

Something stirred in him; why should 13 hours tickle his memory? The rising tension? Forget it, Thomson.

The squawk box made him forget, announcing news that hit him in the stomach; autonavigator was requesting a hold. Don't make it anything important, he pleaded silently, don't make it—

" . . . about 30 minutes, I'd guess," was all he heard of a voice in back. It was enough; he could relax somewhat. Relax? He was getting hardened—think of the time and tax dough it was costing. Half an hour, 20 thousand dollars while he relaxed. It had cost over half a million so far.

Within the estimated time, the count was begun again. He hoped they'd fixed the trouble—a life was at stake. What the devil was the matter with him? Of course, they'd fixed it.

"X minus five minutes," droned the test conductor.

Thomson became aware of a call from inside, pleading to be heard. Savagely, he repressed it, concentrated on the TV screen.

"X minus one minute..." The pleading was louder.

"X minus 40 seconds... X minus 30 seconds and holding for final check. Flight-control building?"

"Affirmative."

"Navigation?"

"Affirm—"

Thomson was no longer listening, no longer seeing, no longer breathing. The repetition: God! the repetition! All of it, almost exactly as on that first firing. Certainly the time was familiar; autonavigation then, as now, had requested a hold after 13 hours of count. And hadn't instrumentation then, as now, predicted less than 30 minutes of hold?

All of it, practically the same, even to the tax money. *Thump: beat, thump:beat*; listen, Thomson, listen to the pleading. Listen, for it probably isn't fear at all but rational survival trying to speak. And a man must look out for himself, Thomson, mustn't he?

*Thump:beat, thump:beat*—he did listen; too late, he knew he was wrong, had been trapped.

Down he swirled, in a black spiral, down to the depths where the monster dwelt. Against his will, Thomson resorbed the mental chains—and the fear-thing, free after 15 months, flooded him; laughing and mocking.

"Telemetry?"

"Affirmative."

then:

"X minus 30 seconds and counting..."

Thomson stared rigidly at the screen, unblinking eyes fixed on the vernials, unblinking eyes incapable of movement.

"Odd," part of him thought, "odd that there should be sudden motion in this still life. Off there to the right—a snake whipping about? No... no, good Lord! An umbilical is unplugged!"

"Stand still be quiet don't move!" the fear-thing commanded. But the creature had miscalculated. Something forced the man's leaden legs to move—something called an idea, something called a concept, something having no label and couldn't, by its subliminal nature.

He was out of the blockhouse before they missed him, for, at that moment, someone in fright yelled: "Emergency! Umbilical one disconnect!"

Gone now were nonchalance and indifference. Another voice quavered: "Lox-tank pressure rising and closing on 2... on 3... on 5..." It was the voice calling out the number of numbers, always measured in pounds per square inch, to infinity, to doom.

"God help that poor guy inside!"

Then Electronics, in the form of the high priest TV, impersonally pointed out that infinity plus one is still death. The screen showed one man, driven by an unnamed something and fought by fear, racing for the pad.

"—that's Thomson outside. Call him back, *call him back!*"

Thomson heard the squawk-box command as a dull whisper, continued toward the ship. Sitting smugly on her butt, she sparkled in the early morning sunlight. Bird, suddenly turned bear—suddenly turned vicious, threatening inversion of her inherent power, threatening destruction of the pilot, of Thomson, and of an intangible called American prestige.

The fear-thing cried, "Power was cut off when the umbilical dropped; the lox-vent valves snapped shut. She's at full pressure by now!"

Thomson ran. He hurt—pain in his head, his lungs, his legs. But he ran.

The fear-thing shrieked, "Even if you make it, there'll be an explosion when the umbilical contacts hit lox—"

Thomson reached the pad. The warning from the blockhouse was heard all over the firing area: "Overpressurization . . . on 12 . . . on 13— She's due to blow!"

The fear-thing, an emotional monster that evolved necessarily with mankind, had reversed its role and argued logically. Now, realizing its mistake, it threw everything it had at the man. It threw height, falling, darkness, and daddy-will-spank-you. It threw sex, insecurity, and color disgustingly mixed. Money and candy, and liquor not so dandy. Police blue and G.I. gray-green.

The fear-thing threw *itself* in a final effort to hold him—and succeeded.

"... on 15 ..."

Thomson stopped beside the huge bulk of inefficient missile, looked up with dispassionate curiosity. The fear-thing had won.

"... on 16—why doesn't he move?"

*Why?* Ever since there'd been a man, even before that, *why* had led him along a few major paths. Here was one: missile, man, and . . . and martyr? *Why?* Focus, finally in detail: William Thomson, you are not keeping faith with intellect.

The fear-thing died in Thomson's bubbling laughter. He grabbed the umbilical, plugged it in. With the snap of opening vent valves, frothy blasts of bluish liquid—oxygen at —300 F—enveloped Thomson.

"Pressure falling on safe zone and below."

In the blockhouse, the test conductor spoke calmly. "X minus 25 seconds and still holding. Emergency medical care required on pad."

The moment of strained, silent relief held until broken by instrumentation. "He can't have much chance; probably dead already. Darn it—and I thought Thomson was a coward. He couldn't have picked a better time to come to the aid of the party."

One hour later, the mongrel safely carried its pilot into space.

**THE END**

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR

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# THE TRAVELING COUCH

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*Some psychoanalysts say  
we can find the root  
causes of our neuroses  
in our childhood. But  
how far back does  
childhood go?*

OF COURSE, the doorbell had to ring. The day had been a series of exasperating interruptions, and Ellen had developed a grim tolerance for each succeeding one. But now, with a naked Jonathon squawling and kicking in his crib, with a roast going black and inedible in the oven, with a clock moving too fast towards her husband's homecoming hour, she heard the doorbell's jangle and bellowed her indignation to the world. The world didn't hear her, but Jonathon did. He set up a lusty sympathetic caterwauling that made her smack his tiny rump in anger.

"Shut up! Shut up, do you hear me!"

She whipped a sheet over him and stalked out of the nursery, not caring about the fact that he promptly kicked it off. When

she flung open the front door and saw the dignified stranger standing pigeon-toed on her welcome mat, she glared inhospitably and said: "Yes?"

"Mrs. Angstrom?" He took off his hat, exposing a bare scalp to the cold. "My name is Dr. Pepys; may I come in and speak to you?"

She would have said no, but the title stopped her. He looked the part, too, with his grave, hollow-cheeked face and small white moustache. She wiped her hands on her apron and stood aside when he entered, noting curiously that he wore no overcoat despite the midwinter chill. He didn't appear affected; the air he brought inside felt toasted.

"I hope you'll forgive this intrusion," he said, without break-

ing his stride towards the living room's most comfortable chair. "But I've come rather a long way to see you. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"No, of course, not." She stopped staring, and then connected his title with an image of accident and sudden illness. "It's not about my husband, is it?"

"No, no," the man said, smiling reassuringly. "Nothing like that, Mrs. Angstrom. As a matter of fact, my visit concerns your son."

"Jonathon?"

"If you'd sit down—" He waved her towards a chair, and she sat down as if the wave had been a command, suddenly conscious of her cheap print dress and the unkempt condition of her hair. "Thank you," he said soberly. "I think this is the best way to hear what I have to say; sitting down."

"What do you mean?"

"I said that my visit concerns your son, Mrs. Angstrom, and it does. You see—" His eyes changed focus strangely. "Your son is a patient of mine, and that's why I'm here."

"Dr. Kaiser is Jonathon's pediatrician. Are you connected with him?"

"I'm not a pediatrician, Mrs. Angstrom. I'm a psychoanalyst. More importantly, I should explain that the son you have now is *not* my patient. The man I'm trying to help at the moment is thirty-six years old, and has been under my care for the past six months."

He looked so rational and intelligent that Ellen didn't entertain the notion for more than a second. But in that second, she wondered if a madman hadn't wandered to her doorstep.

"I'm sorry," he said, flushing slightly. "I'm not explaining this well. The fact is, I'm in the process of helping your son through a severe emotional crisis. He's thirty-six in the world I've just left, but is suffering from traumatic injuries inflicted long before. His condition is serious, and I'm sure you'll want to help me all you can."

She was shaking her head from side to side. "You must have made a mistake, Doctor. My son is only three months old—"

"Perhaps I should be more explicit. In exactly twenty-seven years from now, Mrs. Angstrom, two atomic physicists, named Lu Cheng and Robert Godowsky, will make a startling discovery in the course of their work with Atomic Relativity: the discovery that time travel is possible not merely for electrons, but for larger material objects, including human beings. Three years later, they will have completed the first practical time machine with the ability to move matter both backwards and forwards in the time slot, with the only boundary being the future. The machine will be the most carefully guarded and regulated instrument ever constructed by man, and will be available for use only by authorized persons engaged in legitimate researches,

who will be bound by the strictest sort of regulations during their journeys to the past. This group has already included historians, whose purpose, of course, is not to change in any way the histories they record, but verify them. And most recently, it has included certain members of the medical profession, most especially, psychoanalysts. I'm sure you can see why."

Her head continued to move from side to side.

"Surely, you understand the techniques of analysis, Mrs. Angstrom; they were common knowledge even at this time. The source of all neuroses lies in the past of the patient, often deep-rooted in his infancy. It was a Dr. Hugo Breckman of Berlin who first suggested the possibility of an analyst time-traveling to the past of his patient, in order to better understand the framework of his problem. Several such visits have been made already; it's too early to be certain of their success or failure, but the indications are that it is possible to expedite cures by such means. And that, Mrs. Angstrom, is what brings me here today."

"From—from the future?"

"Yes," the analyst said gravely. "A future in which your son, Jonathon, is a very sick young man."

Ellen's son, Jonathon, still age three months, let the present know that he was a very uncomfortable young man. His wail of

protest penetrated the walls between him and his mother, and Ellen flew out of her chair in the direction of the nursery. She didn't even know that Dr. Pepys was trailing softly behind her as she picked him up out of his crib.

"Shut up! Shut up!" she screamed, as Jonathon's cries approached hysteria. She bore his naked body towards the bassinet and began the diapering process, a knack that had never become one of her skills.

"Has he been like this all the time?" Pepys asked. "Without clothes on?"

She looked at the doctor savagely, the safety pin in her mouth preventing the angry answer for a moment. Then she yanked it out and said: "What do you expect? Every time I start to *do* something, the doorbell rings. Or the telephone. Or the damn stove starts acting up." She stomped her foot as Jonathon made another diaper change imperative. "Oh, *Lord!*" she said, close to tears. "You picked a fine day to climb into that machine of yours—"

"You mean, things aren't always like this?"

"Of course, they're always like this!" She whirled on him. "So I suppose you're going to tell him that it was his mother, his poor, inefficient mother that gave him the whimsies when he was a baby. And that's why he's so mixed up, right?"

"I'm not sure of anything," Pepys said quietly. "There are

so many influences in a child's life—"

"Influences! I'll give you an influence. Just wait until my husband gets home. You'll see Mr. Influence himself. The first thing he'll do is have so many of his damn martinis that he'll fall asleep in front of the TV before nine o'clock. And if he says ten words to me all night I'll knit them on a sampler and hang them up in the hallway—"

"Jonathon seems to have liked his father," the doctor said hesitantly.

"I'm sure he will! I'm sure they'll grow up to be great drinking companions. And he'll probably be a hundred-dollar-a-week chemist like him, too—" She looked sharply at her visitor, conscious of a unique opportunity. "Or is he?" Ellen said. "What does Jonathon do?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that, Mrs. Angstrom. I can't tell you anything about what will happen; it's one of our strictest regulations."

By now, the infant had been pacified with a cold bottle of milk. Ellen sighed, struggled with his night clothes, and got him into the crib. As they left the nursery, the analyst said: "I gather you're not on the best of terms with your husband, Mrs. Angstrom."

"Best of terms! That's putting it nicely." She sat down and lit a cigarette. "My husband and I have an understanding, Doctor. He does what he wants, and I do what he wants. I hate to think

what would happen if I'd produced a *girl* instead of *that*." She hiked her thumb towards the silent nursery. "He practically *ordered* me to have a boy."

"Really?" Pepys murmured.

"Yes, really. My husband does not like girls, Dr. Pepys. Not until they're over eighteen. *Then* he likes them."

"You suspect him of—not being faithful?"

"I don't have to suspect, Doctor. He isn't even courteous enough to be sly."

The doctor was looking at his watch.

"Almost six-thirty," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to end my visit now, Mrs. Angstrom. You have been very helpful, and I thank you. But before I go, I wonder if you would be kind enough to examine this." He reached into his pocket and produced a small, faintly luminiscent globe. There was motion in its interior, and Ellen took it, her eyes curious.

"What is it?" she said, her eyes fixed to the odd, meaningless movements of the tiny roving lights inside the transparent ball.

"Please keep watching it. I'm afraid this is a necessary adjunct to my research. If you keep observing the object, you'll detect a certain compelling, hypnotic fascination. Within a minute or so, you will find yourself entering a deep trance state. No harm will come to you; this is purely a precautionary measure."



"But, why?" Ellen said, unable to lift her eyes from the globe.

"It's nothing you need worry about. When you enter the final trance stage, I will ask you to forget about my visit to you today, so that you will not be tempted to talk about it to others, or concern yourself needlessly about it. That's really all there is to it, Mrs. Angstrom. Mrs. Angstrom?"

She didn't answer. The man from the future took the ball from her hands and replaced it in his pocket with a sigh. Then he spoke to her, softly, telling her what she must do.

Ellen Angstrom arrived home at four, feeling a certain amount of quiet satisfaction in the results of her visit to the attorney's office. Her husband had been surprisingly amenable about the separation agreement; as a matter of fact, his own lawyer had seemed chagrined at his placid acceptance of her stiff terms. Not that the percentage arrangement really mattered; her husband was never much of a money-maker.

She stopped at the floor below her apartment, and was about to ring Mrs. Whittaker's doorbell. She could hear Jonny's piping five-year-old's voice inside, and Mrs. Whittaker, the obliging old lady who took on the baby-sitting chores without fee, replied laughingly. Well, he's happy, Ellen thought with a shrug. Might as well enjoy an after-

noon's peace. She took the elevator to her own floor, went into the apartment, and mixed herself a drink.

When the chimes sounded half an hour later, she was pleasantly muzzy and agreeable. She smiled at the distinguished moustached man in the doorway, and there was a flirtatious lilt in her voice when she said: "Yes?"

"Mrs. Angstrom? My name is Dr. Pepys. I wonder if I could speak to you a moment?"

"Sure, come on in," Ellen said, patting the freshly-permanented curls on the back of her head. "I was just having a little . . ." She stopped, and watched him curiously as he found his way to a chair. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

"I don't believe so, Mrs. Angstrom. But I *am* acquainted with your son, Jonny."

"Oh." Her voice went flat. "Then you must be from the school. Well, you needn't worry about him any more, Doctor. Things are going to be quite different now."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"I know he's been a perfect little monster, but you'll have to understand. My—my husband and I have been having some difficulties, but they're all straightened out now. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking of taking Jonny out of school and putting him somewhere—private. Someplace where they understand problem kids. I think that would be best for him."

"Yes," Dr. Pepys said, touching the end of his neat moustache. "I've heard that there are such schools. But just what do you think your son's problem is, Mrs. Angstrom?"

She laughed sharply. "I can tell you that in one word, Doctor. Spoiled. It's a disease he caught from his father, but we have got it isolated now. Now he'll go somewhere where they won't jump every time he opens his mouth."

"I see. And this will be some sort of—boarding school? Away from home?"

"Yes. I need a vacation from him even more than he needs one from me. Best thing in the world for both of us."

"And what about your husband?"

"Him? He's too busy trying to make something out of his chemical firm. Going to make a million dollars out of miracle drugs, it says here. I don't think he cares much about where Jonny is." She hiccupped, and frowned at her glass. "Just what was it you wanted to see me about, Dr.—"

"Pepys," the man said. "It was nothing really important, Mrs. Angstrom. I merely wanted to find out how Jonny was doing. He always seemed to be such a bright, intelligent boy—"

"Smart," Ellen muttered, realizing that the pleasant glow had gone and that drunkenness was setting in. "Too damn smart, if you ask me."

"Yes," the man said, reaching

into his pocket. "I wonder if you would do me a favor, Mrs. Angstrom?"

"What's that?"

"Would you mind looking at this for a moment?" He handed her a strangely luminescent globe, with odd moving lights in its interior.

In the back seat of the large black automobile, at last free of the obligation to look solemn and unhappy, Ellen Angstrom relaxed, pushed aside the heavy veil, and lit a cigarette. She was glad that Jon had refused to ride in the same car with her, even if this public display of disrespect had its embarrassing side. What was even worse, he had driven to his father's funeral in his own car, the insolent flame-red sports car that roared and growled like an underfed jungle beast. It was somewhere far ahead of the procession by now, snarling at the road in the same way that Jon snarled at the world. Sometimes, Ellen wished that they had remained in the same, uneasy state of middle-class poverty in which Jonathon had been born; her late husband's surprising success in the chemical field had had its advantages for her, but for her son, it had added the problem of too much money to the problem of too little love. The combination was disastrous, as far as Ellen was concerned. Only she wasn't *too* concerned. Not really. She was thinking about Egg.

Egmont O'Hara, that deliciously obvious fortune-hunter,

was waiting for her in his apartment now, planning, she was sure, his pat little speech of commiseration. She was going to enjoy hearing it. Even more, she was going to enjoy acting the role of the bereaved widow, and letting Egg comfort her as only Egg could . . .

Something had happened to the traffic. Red lights were flashing, and there were vehicles at odd slants in all parts of the road. She leaned forward impatiently, and rapped on the glass; the chauffeur lowered the partition between them and said: "Seems to be some kind of accident up ahead, Mrs. Angstrom. Want me to find out?"

She made an exasperated gesture and climbed out of the car herself. It didn't take her long to know that the accident had involved her son; there was no missing the violent color of his automobile. It was leaning crazily against a telephone pole, its ugly snoutlike hood corrugated by the impact of the collision, its right fender like a crumpled piece of red tissue. She felt no sting of anxiety at the sight, for Jon, in his dirty gray sweater and even dirtier corduroy pants, was standing beside the wreck with a cigarette in his mouth, swearing through the smoke. She didn't go to him; instead, she climbed back into the Cadillac and beckoned the driver to go on.

But she was more shaken than she thought. As they came off the highway into the city, she tapped on the glass once more

and told the chauffeur to take her to her own apartment. She would need some time alone, Ellen thought; she wouldn't go to Egg in her widow's blacks, even if the idea had at first seemed mischievously appealing. She'd change first.

There was a stranger in the elevator as she ascended to the penthouse, a handsome, grave-faced man with a carefully trimmed moustache. She glanced at him sidelong as they rode up together, and he responded by removing his hat. She knew he would speak to her as they emerged on the same floor, but she was surprised to learn that he knew her name.

"Mrs. Angstrom? My name is Dr. Pepys. I know this is a poor time to bother you—" He looked pointedly at her attire. "But I would appreciate it if we could talk a moment."

"Do I know you?" Ellen said, squinting at him.

"No, I'm afraid I never had that pleasure. However, I do know your son, and it's Jon I'd like to talk about."

She frowned. "I'm sorry, Dr. Pepys. But I've a very important—I mean, I'm just not in the mood to see anyone right now. I've just come from my husband's funeral."

"Yes, I know," he said, apologetically. "And I understand that your son was involved in some sort of accident—"

"Well, if *that's* what you're worried about, you can forget it. Jon's banged up three cars al-

ready, and he walks away from every smash-up."

"It's really not that, Mrs. Angstrom. Although in a way, I suppose it is—"

"Some other time, Doctor." She put the key into the lock of her door.

"These frequent accidents of his, Mrs. Angstrom. Did it ever occur to you that they're not mere accidents?"

"Not now, Doctor. Please."

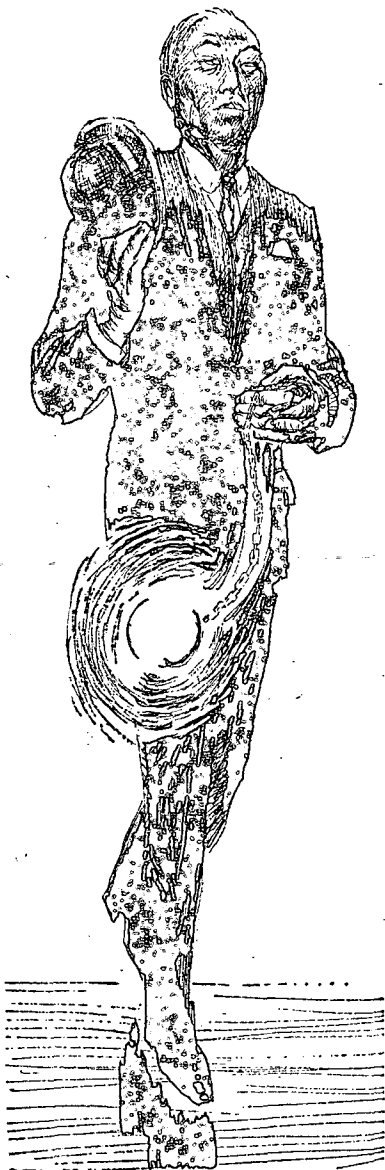
"Surely, you can see the compulsive nature of—"

The telephone was ringing inside the apartment, and Ellen's heart thudded with the knowledge that Egg was on the other end.

"Some other *time!*" she shouted, and shoved the door open, then shut it before the stranger could prevent it. He stood outside her apartment door, his face crimsoned in frustration. Then he turned and went to the elevator, jiggling a small, luminescent globe in his hand.

Looking in the full-length, three-view mirror on the fifth floor of the Sculptured Woman, Ellen Angstrom felt more like crying than buying. In the window, the green sheath dress had seemed made for her complexion and her outlook; but there was no question now that it hadn't been made for her figure. She looked at herself, and made silent, solemn vows about diet.

"It's lovely," the sloe-eyed snip behind her crooned. "Just lovely on you, Mrs. Angstrom. I don't



think we'll have to do a thing to it, do you?"

"No," Ellen said hoarsely. "No, I think it's fine the way it is."

"Then I'll have it sent to you right away," the salesgirl said, with a smile a little too cunning.

Ten minutes later, Ellen hurried out of the store and into the cool autumn air of Fifth Avenue, glad to get away from the incriminating three-sided mirror, even happier with the thought that it was after five, and that she could walk unashamedly into one of the cozy cocktail lounges a few blocks away. By the time she reached the first one, she didn't pause to question its vaguely seedy air, but slipped onto the nearest stool and arranged her furs about her shoulders. She ordered a whiskey sour, and tried not to finish it too quickly. Then she ordered another, and took it into a booth with her.

It was after her fourth drink that she became conscious of the attractive man who was watching her from the far end of the bar. She tried to smile, but the effect was that of a smirk. Nevertheless, he came towards her, and she stopped worrying about what she had seen in the mirror, and decided that she was still a handsome woman.

"May I sit down?" the man said. He was cute. He had a small white moustache and a distinguished jaw. He was just her type, Ellen thought girlishly.

"Please do," she said coyly. "I

wouldn't mind a little company. It's been a *tiring* day."

"May I introduce myself? My name is Pepys, Doctor Pepys. As a matter of fact, I believe we met once, several years ago. Aren't you Mrs. Ellen Angstrom?"

"Why, that's right." She studied his face, but her eyes weren't focusing correctly. "Of course, I remember you, Doctor. Didn't we meet at . . ." She trailed off vaguely.

"It was only a short acquaintance," the doctor said helpfully. "I was rather interested in your son, Jonathon, at the time. How is Jonathon, by the way?"

She froze. "You're not from that place, are you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That place Jonathon is at. You're not connected with them?"

"No, I'm in private practice. You mean Jonathon is—institutionalized at the moment?"

She shivered. "Don't say it like *that*. It's not that he's crazy or anything. There's *nobody* in my family that ever had *that* sort of thing wrong with them. It's a kind of veteran's hospital; the Army put him there. They said it was best."

"Wounded?"

She snorted. "He never left the east coast. Don't ask *me* why they sent him there. I had nothing to do with it."

The man reached into his pocket.

"Have you ever seen this before, Mrs. Angstrom?"

She took the round object from his hand.

"No. What's it for?"

"I didn't think I would have to use it this way, Mrs. Angstrom, but it may be best, to do so under the circumstances. Please keep looking at it. I wish you to remember when we first met, some twenty-four years ago. Then perhaps we can discuss Jonathon more intelligently."

She stared into the depths of the transparent globe, watching the moving lights.

"Mrs. Angstrom?" the doctor said.

She didn't answer.

"Would you please recall our first meeting now, Mrs. Angstrom? Will you please remember who I am, and where I came from, and what my purpose is?"

She looked up. "You again!" she said, and picked up her glass to down the remainder of her drink. Then she signalled the waiter for another. She seemed nervous and very much annoyed.

"I'm only trying to help," Pepys said quietly. "Your son is at a critical point right now, Mrs. Angstrom, and I need your help. Surely, you know why the Army has hospitalized your son. You know, but you won't admit it to anyone. He tried to slash his wrists, didn't he? Even to this day, at the age of thirty-six, I can see the scars on his flesh."

"I don't want to talk about it!" the woman moaned.

"But we must talk about it,

Mrs. Angstrom. You have a duty—"

"Stop bothering me! Stop torturing me!"

The drink arrived; she had no hesitation at finishing it, even before the waiter had moved away.

"Why can't you leave me alone?" Ellen said, a sob of self-pity in her voice. "Why do you have to blame me for everything that happened to Jonathon? Isn't he responsible for any of it? Must I always be the villain?"

"Villain's not the word, Mrs. Angstrom. But still—" He sighed. "There's no question that a great deal of your son's problem is traceable to you. To your lack of understanding, your lack of love, the way you transferred your hatred of your husband to him—"

"All right!" The tears were sliding down her powdered cheeks. "All right, so that's the way it was. But I couldn't help it, could I? I had a husband who didn't love me, a child who thought I was a criminal because I threw him out of my house! Can you blame me for that?"

"Are you sure your husband didn't love you, Mrs. Angstrom? Or was it because you were so reluctant to accept his love?"

"It wasn't any different than the way I was brought up." She was crying openly now, the tears lubricated by alcohol. "My mother was the same way. She had a bum for a husband, too. She had to throw him out, too—"

"I'm sure there are reasons

for your own difficulties, Mrs. Angstrom."

"Then why not blame *them*? My father and mother? Why pick on me? They were as much at fault as me, if you want to talk about fault. Why not blame *them*?"

For a moment, the analyst looked startled.

"Yes," he said musingly. "Yes, you have a point there, of course."

"I loved my father!" Ellen sobbed. "I really loved him. But he was so unfair to my mother. He *made* her throw him out, Doctor, she couldn't *do* anything else—"

"The chain of neurosis," Pepys whispered. "Where does it begin? Where does it end?" He was talking to himself.

"Why not get into the stupid machine of yours, and find out what made my mother so unhappy? Maybe you'll understand things a little better then." She put her head on the table. "You'll see," Ellen Angstrom said. "You'll see the way it was . . ."

"Yes," Pepys said, looking into space. "Another link in the chain. Perhaps that's the real place to begin. Or perhaps even further back, with the grandparents, or great grandparents, or even beyond . . ."

He looked at the woman, and for the first time, his eyes showed pity.

"Mrs. Angstrom. Would you do me one more favor?"

She looked up slowly, to see the tiny luminescent globe in his hand.

Agu came out of the dark stone mouth to see the yellow fire bright overhead. The air, still cold even beneath the yellow fire's burning rays, chilled her and made her wish for more skins to cover her body. But skins she would not have until her mate returned from the hunting, and the yellow fire had kindled and died many times already, without sign of him or the others. With a sigh, she went back to the dark stone mouth to see what must be done for the small man-thing her stomach had given forth.

She growled in her throat when she saw the stranger emerging from behind the great blue rocks that stood before the stone mouth. He wore strange skins, and he was tall and straight like the trees. He backed away when he saw her, and she knew her growls had frightened him. She bared her teeth, and retreated again, until he was out of sight. She would have investigated further, but the small man-thing in the cave was howling. She went inside, and found him naked and shivering on the damp floor, and his ceaseless cries brought such anger to her that she struck him with the back of her broad, hairy hand.

But the screams grew louder and the rage continued.

THE END



# DOLCE AL FINE

By JACK SHARKEY

*Here is one of the most original "end-of-the-world" stories we've ever read,  
an incisive vignette that illumines  
the soul of man.*

LADISLOS began to stir beneath the coarse, frozen matting of the fur quilt. Stiff and irregular, it barely served to keep his raggedly swathed body free of contact with the nightly snows, the snows that fell increasingly more softly, more thickly. The cold had long lost its power to make him shiver. Even trembling used up energy, and his body seemed to sense that it had to rely solely on whatever fuel it had been able to store up while there was still food.

He felt Johansen, curled near to him, twitch in his sleep, and then awaken. He heard the little whimperings as Johansen beat the dry white surfaces of his palms together, trying to pound into them more warmth than they'd been able to absorb from his body, even though he slept

with arms crossed tightly, and fingers burrowing deep within his armpits.

"Ladislos?"

Johansen whispered the name as he always did, lately, as though fearful there would be no reply. Even the whisper was a bare suggestion of sound, so that in the event Johansen heard no response, he could convince himself that he hadn't really spoken loudly enough, convince himself that a louder effort would evoke an answer. And then, once he was convinced, he would not call again, for a second answering silence would tell Johansen that at last he, Eric Johansen, was the last man alive on Earth.

"Yes, Eric. I'm here. Your hands . . . Are they all right?"

A sigh seemed to escape between Eric Johansen's lips at

the voice that sounded in his ears, and he didn't even answer the question. Ladislos could hear him still beating his palms, gone leathery with exposure and a terrible fishbelly white to look upon, and reasoned that when Eric's hands would finally move no more, Eric would tell him. Until that day, it was a waste of breath and energy to ask.

The fur quilt, which even covered their heads, was too rigid to lie flat where its outer edges should have been limply upon the ground. Ladislos could sense, without looking directly, the pallid blue light that lay everywhere beyond the borders of this, their only shelter against the eternal winter that gripped the planet. Today would be . . . how did that phrase go, back on that old TV program? . . . a day like any other day, but—? Something like that, Ladislos remembered. The day, Ladislos knew without trying to lift the quilt from them, would be stark and clear and cold. Everywhere he would look once he'd left his brittle fur shelter he would see nothing but an ugly jumble of whiteness extending from the west to the east. There had been a time when he was able to identify, not from sight but from memory, many of the humped shapes that arose about their camp, a solitary diversion in a world of blue ice and white crystalline snow. There had been a time when he knew the precise hummock that hid Elise's grave,

the tiny swell that marked the unassailable stump of the last tree they'd cut down for their fire, sawed and hacked and broken almost flush with the surface of the soil itself.

Now, there was nothing but immediate sensation when he emerged from beneath the quilt. No memory to plague him with sorrow and longing that did a man no harm, but no good, either. Ladislos shook his head slowly, looking—had he been able to see himself in a glass—like some great wooly bear. His head was a blue-black tangle of long, almost cordlike hair, mixed and matted and locked in place by the steel grip of ice crystals. It had taken him much too long to come out from under the quilt, Ladislos thought, wearily. Nearly a minute, a full minute, to crawl out of his sleeping place and stand erect upon the endless plane of snow. It was too long.

He and Johansen slept longer and longer periods each day. There just *was* no more food to be had, and yet the omnipresence of falling snows saved them from death by thirst. That mercy was denied them. And the cold, most bitter at night, was by day never enough to drain all their energies away. It had something to do with the ice, Ladislos remembered, fuzzily. It had always seemed an inversion of what *should* be, in nature, that when water froze, it gave off heat. It was only when ice was *melting* that heat was sucked from the surrounding air.

The glacier to the north was still a barely visible crest that followed the line of the blindingly white horizon, which stung his eyes painfully despite its being only the reflected light of a pale golden sun. To the south, the companion glacier hadn't as yet appeared to give their camp matching borders.

Perhaps, Ladislos thought dimly, we are further north than we'd thought when we came here. They'd hoped they were at the equator, when they first arrived at the campsite. It was impossible to be certain, with everything under its snow blanket. When the depth of the snows was measured not in inches, but in tens of feet, a Canadian Pine was hardly distinguishable from a Coconut Palm.

A hollow scraping sound behind him told Ladislos that Johansen was coming from beneath the fur. Layers of ice and frost and snow had nearly made the quilt unrecognizable as such. Like *papier-maché*, it had molded itself to their slumbering forms, and now held itself stiffly in that impressed shape, fitting the two of them much as a walnut shell fit over the nutmeat itself.

Ladislos did not turn to watch Johansen's struggle to come out from their sleeping place, which they shared to concentrate the feeble emanations of body warmth. Eric would be embarrassed to be seen moving so stiffly and clumsily, he who had

once been very much the athlete, lithe of movement and healthy, strong. Also, there was no need to turn around. Who else but Eric could it be that Ladislos heard?

Another bear, perhaps? Such as the one from whom they'd made the quilt under which they slept? Ladislos, rather than following this thought into its normal reaction, an apprehensive turn to assure himself that such was not the case, merely found himself dwelling happily upon the incident of that erstwhile bear, and the many weeks—months, perhaps? It was hard to be certain—they had gorged themselves upon the rich, oily flesh of its carcass. Ladislos sighed, remembering those times. That was when they still had fire, and they had cooked the meat (rather recklessly, he felt, in retrospect) upon the sharpened spikes of green twigs, held out over the campfire. (We were fools, thought Ladislos, those twigs might have kept my Elise warm for one more day . . .)

One more day. And for what? To suffer that much longer? To know for another twenty-four hours that they were the last human beings upon the entire planet, that escape was impossible, that the last of the silvery starships had long since departed, crammed almost to the airlocks with the lucky remnants of a threatened humanity who had managed to claw their ways aboard before the blastoff? No,

Ladislos thought, it were better that she die. And Eric, too. And himself.

"The gloves, Ladislos?" Eric's voice whispered huskily in his ear, not quite concealing a whine of sharp need.

"Yes, Eric, yes." Ladislos said hastily. He began to fumble with the rigid rawhide thongs that laced the thick "gloves" onto his hands, extending partially above the wrist. It was hard work, manipulating the ragged end of thong from where it was tucked under itself. A knot in the thong was out of the question; they'd never have been able to remove the frozen twist of thin leather from his arms, then.

Eric was still slapping one hand against the other, his short, stubby fingers a dull blue-white with the cold. Useless to ask Eric's help in unfastening the layers of wool and shreds of fur that made up the gloves. Eric's fingers were nearly incapable of motion when they arose each day, for almost an hour, sometimes.

Ladislos had ceased, many weeks ago, to feel guilty about wearing the only warm hand-coverings they had, while Eric's fingers gradually lost all their strength. At first, he'd insisted on alternating with Eric in their use, but Eric's miserable sobs, on that one morning when Ladislos's fingers had been unable to perform their functions, had helped him to harden his heart against this false pity.

"When we die, Ladislos," Eric had said, the salty tears frozen upon his blond-furred cheeks, "we must die as Men, not as animals. Your hands are all we have left to remind us of what Man once had, of what Man once was . . ."

Henceforth, Ladislos had worn the wrappings without complaint. And Eric had been happy, even though his own hands were useless as a statue's. The hands of Ladislos were the only hands about which Eric cared, anymore.

The thongs crisped and crackled as he slowly unwound them, being careful lest they should break. He shook the wrappings impatiently from his left hand as they loosened, and his hand, freed of the warm encumbrance, soon had the thong on the right hand removed.

Ladislos stooped and carefully picked up both wrappings and their thongs, and slipped them beneath the edge of the hardened fur quilt. There they would remain until the Ritual was over, and he and Eric returned once more to their cold bed upon the hard-packed snow.

"Can you help?" he asked Eric, shuffling away from the quilt. "I don't know if I can manage alone."

"I will try," said Eric, following him.

The day was clear and bright as they made their way across the snow to a tall mound, not quite so tall as themselves. Ladislos hardly noted the fact

that a path had been worn in the snows between their sleeping place and the mound, though elsewhere the white powdery stuff had drifted hip-deep and undisturbed.

He reached the mound and began to dust the snows of the previous night from the resilient surface of the wide woolen blanket. He bent and took hold of the edge near the ground, and watched with a stab of pity as Eric tried vainly to grasp the corresponding edge at the far side with fingers grown useless as straw.

Eric, after a futile minute's labors, sat down in the snow and began to cry.

"Never mind, Eric," Ladislos said, soothingly. "I will manage."

Eric's sobs did not abate until Ladislos, after many trips from one side of the mound to the other, had managed to lift the stiffened blanket, a foot at a time on each side, clear of the squarish, brown structure underneath.

Ladislos looked upon it and smiled, gently. It had taken a long time, a time without fire, for them to use even a part of this, their last link with the past. After one particularly agonizing night of icy sleet and stinging cold, they had compromised by unbolting the unnecessary upper lid and breaking it up for a campfire. Then, in succession, had come the upper front lid, and then the lower. Only the barest essentials now remained

of it. The bench had gone, much earlier, after they'd been unable to cut any more trees.

Ladislos was thankful that, despite the hundreds of moving parts, it needed no lubrication. Oil would have frozen during the night, and rendered it useless, leaving it just another piece of kindling.

Eric had ceased crying, finally, and just sat upon the snow, like a hopeful child, waiting. Ladislos had to smile. Man *was* more than a mere animal, after all. Had they been bound strictly by the drives of their flesh, they would have long before used this object for its heat-value alone. But, Ladislos thought, gazing with a smile at the incredible blue of the dome of sky, his hair and whiskers, in their ice and snow sheaths, reflecting back the pale glory of the dying sun, Man was more than flesh and bone and blood. Man had hungers stronger than those of physical comforts, physical desires.

It was good, thought Ladislos. To die as a Man was a good thing. He was happier in this knowledge than he'd ever been before in his life.

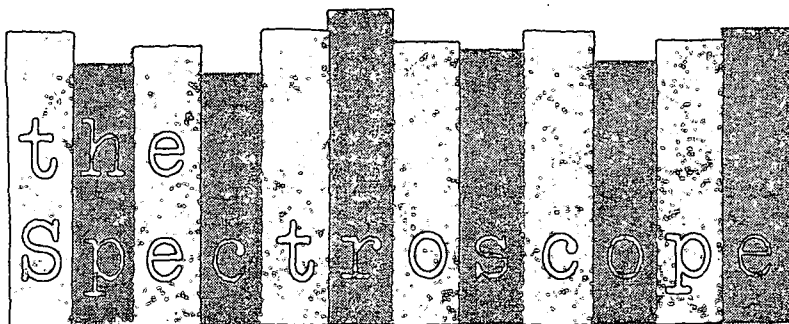
"Ladislos . . ." said Eric, some of the old enthusiasm back in his weak voice, "Please begin! . . ."

With a smile at his friend, Ladislos, the last musician on Earth, leaned toward the last piano and began to play.

**THE END**

DOLCE AL FINE

43



# the spectroscope

by S. E. COTTS

**GIANTS FROM ETERNITY.** By Manly Wade Wellman. 223 pp. Avalon Books. \$2.75.

Manly Wellman seems to have found a very congenial niche. In *Giants from Eternity* he again gives us his own quaint brand of science fiction, a blend of the past and the future. In his previous novel, *Twice in Time*, he combined S-F and an adventure back in Renaissance Italy. In the current book he has pulled a switch, but the same type of idea is still present. Instead of putting a twentieth century man back in time, he has brought five of the greatest scientists of all time forward and dropped them into the contemporary United States.

Oliver Norfleet, a young scientist, is helping investigate a mysterious red blight that is expanding outward from its point of origin in Kansas. The blight swallows everything in its sluggishly flowing path—houses, animals, people. Nothing seems to check its progress. Then Norfleet discovers a way to bring alive the greatest scientific minds of the past in a desperate effort to see if their pooled talents can't come up with the answer.

Wellman's success comes less from the actual story (which is not too strong) than from the charm of his idea and the warmth and good fellowship of these Greats from the past when they meet. (I won't tell who they are because half the fun is seeing how and why they are chosen.) But whatever the reason, *Giants from Eternity* provides entertaining reading.

**THE SEVENTH DAY.** By Hans Hellmut Kirst. 424 pp. Doubleday & Company, Inc. \$4.95.

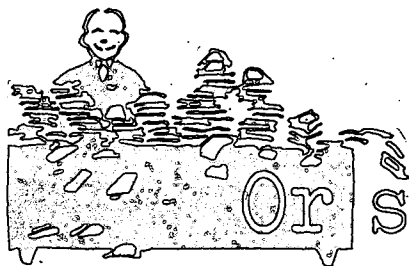
There are those who will claim that this novel isn't science fiction at all; in the narrow sense of the word they are right. Yet any book dealing with events that have yet to happen certainly falls within the science fiction sphere. Sometimes these events are thousands of

years in the future and exist only in the writer's imagination. Other times they are events that could happen tomorrow and are already within the consciousness of many people. Such a one is *The Seventh Day*, the latest novel by Hans Hellmut Kirst, translated from the German by Richard Graves. The book is quite a departure from his previous work, the famous Gunner Asch trilogy, a humorous satire about the one man's private revolt against the tenets of military life in Germany. His current book is an extensive and deadly earnest coverage of the days before the next war. His canvas is a broad one, from the U. S. to Russia, but most of the characters live and plot and die in Poland, East and West Germany, and the divided city of Berlin.

One cannot help but compare this book with *Red Alert* by Peter Bryant, a book I reviewed here a short time ago, which tried to accomplish the same thing. What seemed preposterous in Mr. Bryant's book becomes almost inevitable in Mr. Kirst's. What makes this enormous difference? In *The Seventh Day*, we stand in helpless recognition before the ruthless portrayal of shifting alliances, surface coalitions, meaningless diplomatic notes, spies upon spies, endless propaganda, misunderstandings, continual tensions, and all the other nuances that characterize the obnoxious political maneuvering of both East and West today. In this atmosphere it is very easy to believe, with Kirst, that an inadvertent word or careless action could bring down the whole hypocritical façade. We do not need to swallow Mr. Bryant's contrived plot to get a novel about the cause of the third world war. Unfortunately, it could happen much more simply.

As a novel, Mr. Kirst's book is weak in many ways. As an agonized plea for peace it compels our attention with every word. It has some awkward writing, some unbelievable characters with obscure motivations, endless coincidences, story lines so fragmentary as to need constant turning back to earlier parts, references so variously named that it isn't always clear which side one is reading about. Yet in spite of all this I sat glued to my chair until the last ugly word. Even if one doesn't feel any special sympathy toward Germany, reading Mr. Kirst's impassioned indictment of those who would use that country as a test of their own strength is a moving experience. And the reader who can accept this idea at all will see that the flaws which take away from the book's qualities as a novel become the symbols which add to the stature of the book as a crusade; the coincidences become the capriciousness of authority; the episodic stories, monuments to our lack of real communication between people; the obscure motivation, a mirror of our cloudy goals. None of this makes a pleasant picture, but it's one we should not spare ourselves, nevertheless.





Dear Editor:

Times were when *Amazing* was devoted more to thrilling adventures through the length and breadth of space than at present. Since becoming more educated about many worlds and many peoples the edge of curiosity is becoming dulled, and it seems our own world can still give us adventures in off-beat places sufficient to satisfy the craving for something new. Why suffer in some hostile world? Why not just suffer here in the world we know?

My interest in science fiction is gradually losing out, for different reasons.

I don't buy magazines containing serials unless caught unawares. "The Galaxy Primes" caught me such, and so I have to have all the copies saved in order to have a complete story to read. I suggest those who want complete novels of great length buy them in book form. In my opinion such novels often have too much descriptive matter at the expense of action.

Until recently I bought other magazines. Now they cost 50 cents and I wouldn't be able to enjoy the stories knowing how much they cost me.

There are those who want horror stories. Sadists, perhaps?

Youth must have its fling. Perhaps I am through flinging. Truth seems now to be more amazing than fiction. Impossibilities become simple things when understood.

I am a long-time reader of *Amazing*. It has given me many hours of relaxation and entertainment, and I think it has served to influence my life, to point the way to more knowledge and understanding of the realities of life in all creation.

If you are going in for serials and horror, or horrid weird stories, count me out. Who likes to dwell on thoughts of horror? Dispose of unpleasant things in proper manner, and forget them. "Out of sight, out of mind." Taken care of, they are no more.

H. S. Conard

Route 4, Box 90A

Port Orchard, Wash.

○ *No sadists we, and no serial-lovers, either. We think that what Amazing has given you in the past it will continue to give in the future. Stick with us, kid, and you'll never be through flinging.*

Dear Editor:

I was really anxious to get the May issue, as it contained the last installment of "The Galaxy Primes," which is one of the best s-f stories I have read in a long time, even though it is a serial, which is a nuisance. As one of Dr. Finnagle's laws goes: "If you ever miss any issue of a magazine, it is the one which contains the installment you most wanted to read." I was exceedingly careful not to let that happen this time.

The Russian story, "Initiative" was good and it is interesting to know that the East and West at least have one thing in common.

W. C. M. Vaughan  
St. Peter's School  
Peekskill, N. Y.

○ *Yes? What?*

Dear Editor:

I've only read four of your magazines so far, but from what I have read you can call me a steady customer from now on. In the editions of *Amazing* that I've read I have three favorite authors and two favorite novels. The authors: Isaac Asimov, Joseph E. Kelleam and E. E. Smith. The stories: "Hunters Out of Time" and "The Galaxy Primes." I hope (and I don't think I'm alone in my feelings) that there will be more from all three of these authors in future issues of the magazine.

A/2c Teddy Richardson  
Box 572, Manzano Base  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

● *OK. Hello, steady customer.*

Dear Editor:

After reading the May issue of *Amazing* I couldn't help writing to congratulate E. E. Smith for his story. This was, in my opinion, truly an amazing story. I would like to see more stories of this nature and length. I've never cared for continued stories but after this, bring them on.

James Huckabey  
11030 Duncan Ave.  
Lynwood, California

...OR SO YOU SAY

47

Dear Editor:

Starting with the March issue of *Amazing* there has been a marked improvement. Interesting covers, not weird and sexy, better authors, and a higher quality of stories.

In the May issue: I can't say enough about "The Galaxy Primes." I have read hundreds of s-f stories and this is one of the most memorable, really worth waiting for. I hope they put out a hard cover edition of same.

"Initiative" was all right, but not up to the others. Of course it was interesting, but I didn't, to coin a phrase, "dig it." Asimov's editorial was very good and that, plus E. E. Smith was worth the price of the issue.

Janet Freeman  
91 Hawes Ave.  
Hyannis, Mass.

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the best novel in any 10 years of s-f reading. "The Galaxy Primes," by E. E. Smith is IT. It was sure worth waiting three months to finish.

Rodney Mize  
Route 8  
Fayetteville, Ark.

○ *The comments on the Smith story prove again the old adage: Readers don't like or dislike serials, or short shorts, or horror stories, or any given category of length or subject matters; readers like or dislike stories.*

Dear Editor:

I thought that "A Handful of Stars" in the June issue of *Amazing* was one of the best novels that I have ever read in any magazine. In fact, I dare say it is the best novel that *Amazing* has ever published since Don Wilcox and the good old days.

It is the best of Poul Anderson, so far.

James W. Ayers  
609 1st St.  
Attalla, Ala.

○ *Strong praise indeed, but we can all weather it.*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* for practically two years. The stories are almost always good. But I

have a complaint. The cover of your May issue was very good. I could just picture the story—a spaceship lands on the barren surface of meteor pocked, airless world. As the four-man crew of the lifeless world start to explore, one of the men glances up a crater wall and sees a glint of sunlight from a metal plate. Turning to signal the others he sees their ship dissolve before his eyes.

Would make a very good story, don't you think? One more question—where is it?

Reading "Coming Next Month" I see that one of the stories, by one of my favorite authors, Poul Anderson, is being illustrated. How often do you illustrate stories—twice a year?

Wayne Lavigne  
Rt. 1, Box 130  
Ponchatanta, La.

© Answering your second question first, we illustrate stories when we think they are worth it, when we have a good idea for the illustration, and when we have the space to run it. The answer to your first question is obvious. The manuscript was put for safe-keeping into the spaceship—just before it was dissolved.



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COMPLETE  
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# A TASTE OF FIRE

By LLOYD BIGGLE

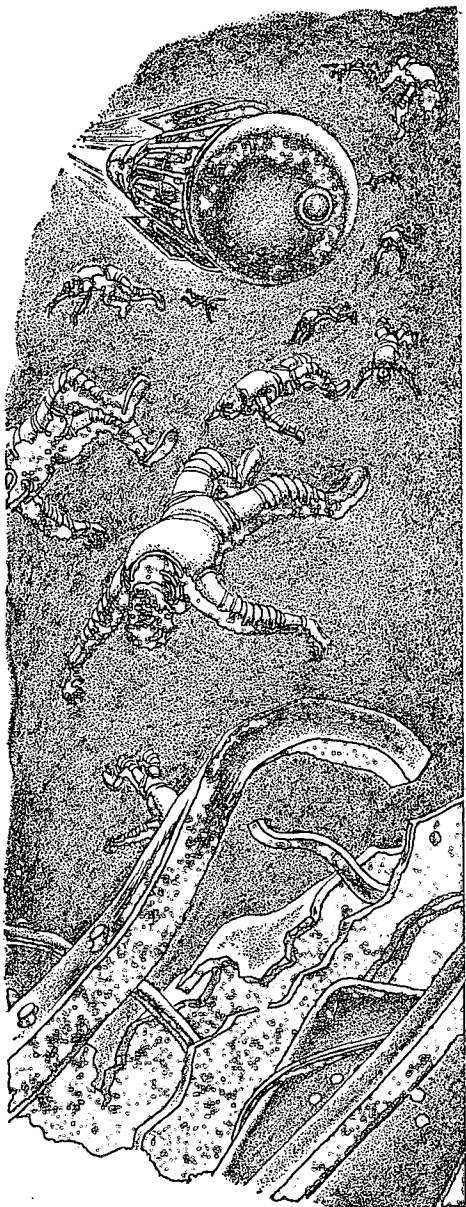
ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

## CHAPTER 1

HE LAY suspended in a delicious void of no sensation, and his slowly returning consciousness intruded rudely. He resisted it, turning aside the fragile wisps of thought until his mind boldly posed a question: Where am I?

His mind answered: In a hospital.

He had seen enough of the planet as he came crashing down to know that it supported a high civilization. Medical science would be elaborately developed, and it was lavishing attention upon him. If it were not, his awakening would have been a pain-wracked inferno instead of this delightful nothing feeling.



The zombis struck again





leaving space littered with drifting, suffocated bodies.

Or perhaps there would have been no awakening. The odds had been stacked rather formidably on the side of not awakening when he saw solid ground rocketing towards him.

He opened his eyes.

The room shimmered in a misty blue light. Pale blue smocks bent over him. Two men with solemn faces were studying him gravely, communing with his life force in the mysterious manner of all doctors. There was an aura of sympathy about them, of the power of healing.

He lay with limbs immobilized and looked up at them. His mind floated languorously, a thing apart from his inert body. "I must have done a first-rate job of smashing myself up," he thought.

Suddenly alarm tensed the faces above him. The change was so drastic, so startling, that panic overwhelmed him, and he struggled frantically to raise an arm or move his head. He knew that they could not understand his language, but in his desperation he spoke.

"My name is Paul Corban. I am an Ensign in the Space Navy of the Galactic Federation. My base . . ."

They were gone. There was no more than the flick of an eyelash between their presence above him and the disheartening emptiness of the shimmering blue ceiling that arched above his head. He screamed wildly.

In response came nothing.

There was not even a dull echo to mock him.

He screamed again as his mind grappled with the terror of being utterly alone and utterly helpless. No one came, and after a time he relaxed and drifted off to sleep. The absence of sensation was no longer a pleasure, and his sleep was haunted by the parting glances flung his way by the two doctors—expressions of unspeakable, ruthless loathing.

A new face hovered above his when he awoke. It was a woman, young, not unattractive except for her hair styling, which left her head trimmed bare about her ears, and piled hair upwards on top of her head to give her face a mournfully elongated appearance. Her smock, he noted, was a dark blue.

She thrust a straw into his mouth. It was attached to something she held beyond his field of vision. He was hungry, and he drank deeply of the thick, flavorsome soup. All the while watching her.

The woman's attitude puzzled him. He lay helplessly on his back, able to control only his eyes and his lips. He could hardly have presented a menacing appearance. But there was apprehension in her face, distrust—almost fright.

And loathing. Unmistakable loathing. It was as though she had been condemned to care for a hideous reptile of uncertain origin.



He spoke around the straw. "Why do you hate me?"

She winced, and the taut line of her mouth underscored her silence. He watched her as he drank the soup. Had her face paled suddenly when he spoke, or had he imagined it? She could not understand him. She was alien to him, perhaps more alien than he could imagine, and it was probably foolish of him to attempt to interpret an alien's emotions through facial expressions.

He finished the soup, and released the straw. The woman vanished. She did not move away—she did not move at all. In the same instant her face was and was not bending over him. He lay blinking at the ceiling.

"Maybe I'm delirious," he said. "Maybe they're delirious. Or maybe they do it with mirrors."

He slept and woke. His bodily needs were attended to. He patiently submitted to the scrutiny of a multiplicity of figures in various shades of blue, who loomed above him suddenly, and just as suddenly disappeared.

In his waking moments he day-dreamed. A civilian investigating committee had arrived at Qualo Base just before he left, checking into a rash of accidents involving the 11C, the military courier ship. The committee claimed that the ship was uneconomical and unsafe. It lacked proper navigational instruments. Its one-man crew had to function as pilot, engineer and navi-

gator, which was too big an order for a young officer. The ship had inadequate fuel reserves. The military, of course, denied everything.

Corban breathed a fervent Amen to the entire bill of indictment. He had gotten himself lost—so thoroughly lost that he had no idea where he had landed. This world might be an undiscovered part of the known galaxy, or it might be somewhere off into the unknown. There was lots of space in the galaxy, a fact which had been uncomfortably brought home to him when his fuel ran low and he was looking for a suitable planet for an emergency landing.

He wondered how long base could cover up his disappearance before the investigating committee dug it out. If his own misfortune were the one factor that led to the scrapping of the 11C, he'd have accomplished something. None of the courier pilots loved the work. It wasn't much fun batting about space by oneself, even though the brass delivered long paeans about the excellent training and experience.

But whatever the investigating committee recommended, it would come too late to help Paul Corban. He'd come down too fast to observe signs of space travel. Perhaps this unknown civilization had it, perhaps not. If it didn't, he was marooned. If it did, perhaps he was marooned anyway. Strange civilizations were known to be wary about

contacting potential enemies, even in an act of mercy. He'd have to wait and see.

He wondered how his family would take the news. His mother and father would confidently wait for him to turn up—somewhere, somehow. His brother Bill, who had violated all principles of sound reasoning by joining the army, would go around prating his obsolete nonsense about keeping one foot on the ground—as if the army could ever get to a war by keeping on the ground! As for his sister Sue, who would have set her wedding date by now—he hoped the news of his disappearance wouldn't arrive until afterwards. He wouldn't want anything to spoil Sue's wedding.

He amused himself for a time by imagining little Sue in a wedding gown, and by-and-by he slept.

Sensation returned to him slowly. He was able to move his head, and realize that it was heavily bandaged. One side of his face was bandaged. Feeling crept slowly down his right arm. He became conscious of his legs, heavy and unwieldy. The two doctors who flashed into his presence at regular intervals kept examining him with meticulous care, but even in the deft certainty of their movements he sensed a reluctance, a hesitation. Watching them, he knew that they hated to touch him. They spoke no word, either to him or to each other, and they

always disappeared simultaneously.

As soon as he could move his head, he turned his attention to the room around him. There was little to see. It was a cell, rather than a room, small, six-sided, without doors or windows. One corner was partitioned off, and strange objects could be seen through a partly-opened sliding door. Strange, but not unmistakable. It was a bathroom. Just below the high ceiling, a grillwork ran completely around the room, and seemed to be the source of light—and also, he thought, ventilation or heat.

His food changed from liquids to solids. The female attendant fed him cautiously, courageously, and uttered no sound. None of his visitors uttered a sound, and the silence became a torment. He lost track of time. He was unable to distinguish between day and night, even if the planet had a day and a night, because the dim haze of blue light in the room was always the same.

There came that triumphant moment when he was first able to push himself into a sitting position, but the feeling of exaltation was quickly lost in the amazement inspired by his bed. As he raised himself up, the bed rose behind him to accommodate his new position. This seemed merely ingenious, until he looked down and found his bandage-swathed body resting upon nothing at all.

There was a box-like object

on the floor below him, six feet long, three wide, a few inches thick. Above him—nothing! Still he rested comfortably three feet above the floor. He tested the bed with his hands, with his body. It adapted itself to the contour of his body, to his movements, firmly soft, completely yielding without yielding at all.

The only other item of furniture in the room was a small table.

"A high civilization," he thought. Marvelous mechanical contrivances, that permitted the optimum use of space because such mundane considerations as light and ventilation were no longer important. There was an advanced medical science. The blue light probably killed germs. Pain had been banished. "Now," he thought, "if I just knew how the hell they get in and out of this room . . ."

The two doctors were standing beside the bed when he turned. They were familiar figures, now—their faces, their mannerisms, even, he thought, their moods, except that he was never quite certain as to what their moods might represent. One doctor was tall, with a long, lean face that seemed perpetually mournful. The other was shorter, with a round face that normally held no expression at all.

Obediently he leaned back, and the bed accommodated his movement. They bent over him, and began to remove the bandages from his chest. As always, they seemed to hold themselves

apart from the duty that their hands must perform, and distaste crept into their expressions.

The last of the bandages fell away. They examined his chest, and then, as he watched them, they disappeared. He straightened up and sat for a long time studying the floor where they had been standing.

"If they would say something," he thought, "it wouldn't be so bad. Perhaps I could pick up a little of their language, find out what the score is—what it is about me that disgusts them so. I wouldn't, even care if they didn't talk to me, if they'd just talk to each other now and then."

If he had to remain in this society, he would be an outcast. That much seemed certain. And he might never know why.

He was sleeping the next time the doctors came. They awakened him, and he sat up quickly. Strength was pulsating back into his body, and he was impatiently awaiting the moment when he could leave his bed. He wished he could ask them how long it would be before he could use his legs.

They removed the bandages from his head, and suddenly there was a third man beside them, a boyish-looking young doctor, and with him was a machine. The thing was slender, as tall as a man, and dazzling in its multitude of colored dials, buttons, and incomprehensible gad-

gets. The young doctor rolled the machine over to the bed, and placed a gleaming, helmet-like affair on Corban's head.

He tensed with alarm, and then forced himself to relax. They had saved his life. Whatever they might think of him, they had given him excellent care. There was no reason for him to be suspicious.

The machine hummed, and flashed to life. The older doctors retired to the far corner of the room. The young doctor's fingers played expertly with buttons and dials. Pain throbbed in Corban's head, became a pounding torment, and exploded him into unconsciousness.

The machine was gone when he opened his eyes. The doctors were still there, waiting as if nothing very important had happened. The young doctor placed two black-and-white striped globes on the bed beside him. They looked very much like small balloons, and Corban touched one and decided that they *were* balloons. "My present for being a good boy?" he wondered.

The young doctor's expression intrigued Corban. It was eager, almost childishly expectant. He frowned as Corban watched him, and shifted the position of the balloons. Corban understood, and watched the balloons.

One of them moved slowly upwards. It hovered in front of Corban's face, and in his perplexity he moved his hand above it and around it. The balloon continued to hover, and finally it

moved slowly downwards to the bed.

The doctors were watching Corban. He looked at them, looked at the balloons, and shrugged. He said nothing. He had long since learned that the sound of his voice irritated them.

A balloon rose again, rose slowly, all the way to the ceiling. As it started down, the second balloon rose. Both stopped in front of Corban's face. On an impulse, he reached out and pushed at a balloon. To his amazement it resisted. It seemed solidly fixed in midair. He withdrew his hand and watched. One balloon slid slowly downwards to the bed. The other rose to the ceiling. Up and down they went. They circled the room and returned to the bed.

Corban stretched out his hand, and batted at one. It rose into the air and floated away, to come down slowly. It bounced lightly on the floor. The doctors had edged forward. Clearly they wanted him to do something, but they couldn't tell him what it was, and evidently they wouldn't show him. He sank back onto his bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering just what the devil was going on.

When he looked up again, the young doctor was beside him with the machine.

Corban shoved the helmet aside. He was prepared to do battle, if necessary, to keep that miniature torture chamber away from his head. The young doctor made another attempt, and

then stepped back. He extended one hand, light flashed in front of Corban's eyes, and he lost consciousness.

He awoke with pain pounding in his head. The machine was gone. The balloons rested on the bed beside him, and the doctors stood waiting.

The same nonsensical procedure was repeated three times. The balloons performed fantastic tricks. Corban watched dumbly, and the doctors waited expectantly. Then they would bring back the machine.

Finally they left him, and he lay awake for a long time wondering how soon he could escape, and how he would go about doing it. He knew they would be back—the doctors, and the balloons and the machine—and the thought terrified him.

When they came again they removed the last of his bandages. He looked his nude body over carefully, searching for some sign of damage, for scars, and found himself miraculously unblemished. He flexed his legs luxuriously. Considering what he had been through, his physical condition seemed excellent. As the doctors watched, he got hesitantly to his feet and took his first, faltering step.

He did not doubt that they had performed a miracle of healing upon him. Few men survived such a crash as he had taken. His body must have been a battered pulp. He felt a twinge of guilt at having resisted them

when they had labored so long and so diligently to restore his health.

Then they brought the machine, and the balloons.

As soon as they left him alone, he climbed from his bed and began to inspect the room. He searched the walls for a sliding panel, similar to that which led into his bathroom. He found none. He found nothing at all but a smooth, metallic surface. The grillwork near the ceiling was plainly beyond his reach, even if it did provide a means of escape.

He would have to wait, but while he waited he must make himself strong. He began to trot around the brief circumference of the room. His unused muscles quickly protested, but he was satisfied at having made a start.

He had no clothing, and he dreaded the appearance of a female attendant. He had not minded being looked after while he was bandaged and helpless, but now that he was able to look after himself he felt needlessly exposed. He was apprehensive as meal time approached, but no attendant came. Instead, a meal tray mysteriously appeared on the table that stood near his bed. He ate, and returned the tray to the table. It disappeared.

His next visitor was the young doctor. He brought two shining disks, which he placed on the floor at opposite sides of the room. They were a full yard in diameter, and perhaps three or four inches thick. When the doc-

tor saw that he had Corban's attention, he stepped onto one of the disks. Corban watched open-mouthed as the doctor rose slowly upwards. He placed his hand against the wall, pushed himself away, and bounded back to the floor.

With gestures, he invited Corban to try it. Corban shrugged, and stepped onto the disk. Immediately he experienced a weird weightlessness. The floor sank slowly away from him. He pushed himself away and dropped lightly to the floor.

The doctor beamed his satisfaction. It was, Corban thought, the closest thing to a smile he had received since he first regained consciousness.

Under the doctor's eager supervision, he repeated the experiment. On the third try he boldly let himself ride up to the ceiling. As he peered curiously at the grillwork, the doctor hurried forward and made an adjustment at the side of the disk. Corban floated slowly downwards.

At least the effort hadn't been wasted. He knew, now, that there was no way of escape there.

"It's good sport, chum," Corban said. "But aren't we a little old for this sort of thing?"

The words brought a scowl to the doctor's face. Frowning, he stepped onto the disk, floated upwards, and vanished. Corban blinked, whirled, and saw him descending slowly above the second disk. The doctor repeated

the process twice. Disk number one, a short ride up, vanish. Appear mysteriously over disk number two, and ride down.

"This science of theirs," Corban thought, "is pretty hot stuff. Now I understand their disappearing acts. They probably wear an atomic power unit in those funny sandals."

In that instant he evolved an escape plan. If the doctor would teach him to transfer himself from one disk to another, perhaps he could find an auspicious moment to transfer himself beyond the hospital. He had nothing to lose in trying.

The doctor pointed to disk number one. Corban pointed to his feet. Eventually the doctor understood, and reluctantly removed his sandals. Corban put them on, and eagerly stepped onto the disk. He held his breath, and waited to be transferred across the room. Nothing happened, except that he floated upwards and gently bumped his head on the ceiling.

The doctor lowered him to the floor, and moved the second disk closer to the first. Corban tried again. He floated upwards, and when nothing happened he reached out to the wall and pushed himself away. He gauged the distance nicely. His thrust carried him over the second disk, which allowed him to sink easily to the floor.

The doctor seemed confused. While Corban waited he stood for a few minutes lost in solemn meditation, and then he claimed

his sandals, picked up his disks and vanished.

Corban continued his exercising. He gave himself a stiff course in calisthenics, and wracked his brain to think of muscle-building exercises. He had great sport diving onto his odd, non-existent bed, which easily absorbed his most reckless dashes. His strength returned rapidly.

The young doctor continued to visit him at regular intervals. He brought his balloons, or the disks, or some other idiotic contrivance. There was a small game which seemed to play itself, with pieces shifting according to some intricate pattern. When Corban took the board, the pieces remained motionless. There was an arrangement of steps, and the doctor moved from one to the other with a dazzling technique which seemed to consist of disappearing from one step and reappearing at the same instant on the next. When Corban's turn came, he casually walked up and down. The doctor was obviously disappointed.

Eventually this doctor and his gadgets began to irritate Corban. He was feeling physically fit, his health was fully restored, and lingering on in a hospital merely to watch a youthful doctor's parlor tricks made no sense to him. He decided to put a stop to these sessions by ridiculing them, and in time he succeeded.

The doctor was playing with

his disks, and he had just transferred himself from one disk to the other and floated smugly back to the floor. Corban said aloud, "That's not bad, chum, but I can do tricks, too. Look."

He stood on his head. He turned cartwheels. He walked a few steps on his hands. He made a graceful swan dive onto his bed, turned a somersault, and ended up in front of the doctor with a polite bow.

The doctor gathered up his equipment and disappeared. Corban never saw him again.

For what seemed an interminable length of time he was left completely to himself. His meals arrived, and he ate them. The tray vanished when he returned it to the table. He missed the young doctor's visits, and began to regret his rash action.

His next visitors were not doctors. They were husky individuals, dressed in yellow smocks and trousers, and they brought no games to play with him. They grasped him firmly, one on each side, and before he was conscious of change he was no longer in his room.

The place was six-sided, like his own room, but much larger. There was a formidable array of blue-smocked doctors on hand, male and female. There were women dressed in the darker blue he associated with nurses. In the center of the room was one of the queer, invisible beds, identifiable only through the base plate on the floor. The room's lighting focused on the



bed with a startling, glareless brightness.

The other equipment was strange, but Corban did not have to be told what it was. In a hospital on Earth, or at the far end of the galaxy, that kind of an arrangement could mean only one thing—surgery.

And the patient was Paul Corban.

He jerked free of his escorts. "What's the big idea? There's nothing wrong with me."

A doctor stepped forward. Corban leaped away, and placed his back to a wall. All faces in the room were fixed upon his nakedness. The yellow-smocked men moved towards him calmly.

"Keep away!" Corban shouted. "I'm not having any operation. I don't need one."

His words dropped hollowly in the sound-deadened room. The only other sound was his own quick breathing. The faint scent of some kind of drug or medicine turned his fear to panic. He flattened a yellow-smocked man with one punch, and the other slowly backed away.

The doctor walked towards him. Corban watched him warily, hands ready to defend himself. The doctor pointed, light flashed, and Corban lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own room, or in one exactly like it. He felt no pain. He felt almost no sensation at all, though his arms and legs moved freely. He pushed himself erect, and searched his body anxiously. What had they done?

Crippled him? Emasculated him?

He moved his hand, and found the bandage. They had operated on his head.

He felt drained of energy, and utterly despondent. His tray of food appeared on the table, remained there, and finally disappeared untouched. He did not want food. He wanted nothing but to get out of this damnable place, to hear human voices, to lie on the grass and watch the sun go down.

After he ignored the third meal, his two doctors came to examine him. They checked his body thoroughly, except for his bandaged head. He pointedly ignored them. A nurse came, and attempted to feed him. He turned his nakedness away from her, and when he looked again she was gone. The food continued to arrive on schedule, and eventually hunger forced him to eat.

They came in a delegation to remove his bandages. There were five doctors, all strangers except for one he remembered from the operating room. They brought all of the paraphernalia with them—the balloons, the disks, the games. The doctors examined his head in turn, and then they stepped back while one of them performed.

Corban watched sullenly. The balloons went up and down. Corban ignored them. The doctor performed the disk trick expertly. Corban refused to play. And so it went, with the doctors

watching him intently. Their facial expressions were a puzzle to him. There was interest there, certainly. Eagerness—perhaps. But behind it all was an aversion, a loathing that made him cringe and want to hide. And there was no hiding place.

Silently they watched. Silently they gathered up their equipment. Each doctor in turn moved close to him, and stepped back. Then they turned away, turned their backs to him, and disappeared. The gesture seemed symbolic. They were giving him up. He was a hopeless case.

## CHAPTER 2

TEN minutes later he left the hospital. Two male attendants brought clothing, and Corban obediently pulled on black trousers and smock. The attendants took his arms, and the hospital room disappeared in an instant.

They were in an enormous, brightly-lighted, circular room. The high dome of the ceiling arched far above them. There was a scattering of people in the room, some disappearing while Corban watched, others appearing before his startled eyes. Those who saw Corban regarded him hatefully, or turned away.

Then the attendants gripped his arms again. They passed through a series of such rooms, all similar, and no two exactly alike. Corban could only speculate idly as to the distance they

were covering, and he lost count of the number of stops.

Finally he was led out of a circular room, and into a corridor. The hospital attendants turned him over to a muscular young man wearing a dark-blue smock and trousers. No words were exchanged.

They left the building. Corban had a brief glimpse of sunshine and bluish-green grass, and then he was in an enclosed ground car. The ride was a long one—half an hour, he estimated, over an absolutely smooth road. In the windowless interior of the car, he had no idea how fast they were going.

Their destination was a sprawling, single-story building with a gray-metallic exterior. Corban was offered food, which he refused. He was led down a long corridor, and gestured into a room. The door closed behind him. He tried it immediately, and found it locked.

"Anyway," he said to himself, "it's different. And it has windows!"

He looked out on a lovely, wooded park. There were courts, where some kind of a game was being played. Men and women dressed similarly to himself were walking about or sitting. Through the trees, he caught a glimpse of rolling farm land. A small stream traversed the park.

"Must be some kind of a convalescent home," he thought. "It could be worse."

It could have been a hell of a lot worse. He grinned his satis-

faction, and turned to examine his room.

He recognized the invisible bed immediately. There was also an invisible chair, and a small table similar to his hospital table. There were even pictures set in the wall—three-dimensional, animated nature scenes, where brooks bubbled, water splashed merrily over waterfalls, and birds flitted about trees that swayed realistically in the wind. There was a bathroom, and a small closet with drawers set in the wall. Corban tried them, and found that they folded out, rather than pulled.

"Real home-like," he said. Someone had given a lot of thought to making the place comfortable. He wondered how long it would be his home.

Suddenly one panel of the gray door glowed softly pink. Corban tried the door, and it opened. A trio of doctors confronted him gravely. They made no move until he stepped back and invited them in with a gesture. At this place, at least, they seemed to respect his privacy. That pleased him.

With motions they asked him to remove his clothing. They examined him. With motions they told him to dress. They did not speak, and they left with a gesture that seemed half bow and half salute. He tried the door after they closed it, and found it locked.

A young man in the dark blue of a nurse brought extra cloth-

ing, all of it the drab black color that he was wearing. His door remained locked. He went to the window again, and looked out on the park. The window resisted his pushing and pulling until he noticed a lever on the wall nearby. A push, and the entire window moved outward some four inches. He sniffed eagerly at the breeze that drifted in to him. From somewhere nearby came clumsy plucking on a musical instrument. Suddenly a voice was lifted in song. He felt strangely moved. It was the first human voice he'd heard since he left Qualo Base, long months before. And it proved that these people had a spoken language—even if they did not choose to speak to strangers.

As the first shadows of dusk touched the park, a meal tray appeared on his table. He ate looking out of the window. The room grew dark, and he did not know or care what the lighting arrangements might be. He remained by the window, straining his ears to catch the sound of passing footsteps, or the faint murmur of an unintelligible conversation.

In the morning he bathed, dressed himself, and ate the food that so conveniently appeared on the table. The continued confinement puzzled him. It was not unreasonable that they should isolate a newcomer for a time, to assure themselves as to his health; but certainly that should not apply to a person

just discharged after a lengthy stay in the hospital!

A series of musical notes sounded softly. He looked around for the source, and found the door panel glowing pink. He leaped for it eagerly.

His caller was a girl. She wore the light blue smock and trousers of a doctor, which seemed startling because she looked so young. She entered at his gesture of invitation, closed the door after her, and stood smiling at him.

With a sweeping gesture he offered her his chair. She turned, went to the closet, and brought out the base plate for a second chair. She placed it on the floor, made an adjustment, and rested herself on the invisible cushion of the chair.

She was decidedly attractive. The above-the-ears hair styling still seemed odd to him, but this girl would have been attractive anywhere, regardless of fashions. His contacts with other women of this planet had been brief and perfunctory, but he sensed immediately that somehow she was different.

Watching her smile, he understood. She was accepting him casually, as a fellow human. There was a delightful, innocent enthusiasm in her expression. He obediently accepted her unspoken invitation to sit beside her, and he continued to watch her wonderingly.

From a bag, she shook a pile of polished cubes onto the desk in front of him. She spread them

out, selected four, and arranged them in a row.

"Alir," she said.

Her voice was soft and musical, and he drank deeply of the sound long after it had faded. The cubes—yes, there were odd symbols engraved on the sides. They would be letters. She was teaching him her language.

"Alir," he repeated.

She pointed to herself. "Alir."

He nodded. So her name was Alir. A beautiful name, until he remembered that there would be some kind of prefix or suffix meaning doctor.

She pointed at him. "Paul," he said. She selected three cubes, arranged them in a row, and repeated, "Paul." And having managed the introduction, she began the first lesson.

She spent several mornings with him, and as soon as he had a small working vocabulary she took him on a tour of the building. The place seemed enormous, though he wondered if that might not be a natural reaction to his having been confined for so long. He was shown the dining rooms, a circular indoor pool, and a variety of recreational facilities, most of which he did not understand. He was taken for a walk in the park, and introduced to a number of persons who wore his own shade of black.

Impulsively he tried the door after she left him in his room. It was unlocked. He closed it again, and stretched out on his bed. He had been a prisoner for

so long that a measure of freedom made him feel uneasy.

He was apprehensive lest the unlocked door mark the end of his language lessons, but Doctor Alir came as usual the next morning. She went to some pains to instruct him on the daily routine. He could go to one of the dining rooms for his meals, or he could have them sent to his room. He had the freedom of building and grounds, except for those rooms or areas that were plainly marked for authorized personnel. Women were housed in the opposite wings, and if he cared to cultivate the acquaintance of any of them, he was free to do so. Some of the patients worked at various occupations that interested them, some had various hobbies, which she called diversions. If he cared to occupy himself with either, he had only to ask. She would come each morning to continue his language instruction until he became sufficiently fluent. His only other obligation was to present himself for a physical examination when asked.

He asked a question, piecing it together as well as he could from his limited vocabulary. How long was he to be there?

Was it his imagination that her smile faltered? "Until you recover," she said, which seemed reasonable enough at the time. It wasn't until afterwards that he balanced this against the apparently perfect state of his health, and wondered.

As soon as she had gone, he

left his room and hurried down the long corridor. He left the building at a side door, skirted the park, and walked quickly away across the fields. Grain was ripening in the bright sunshine. It grew in widely-separated, circular patches, its dusky brown kernels swaying at the top of waist-high stalks. In the distance two black-clothed men operated a low, oblong machine. Corban moved easily across the field, paralleling the road that curved away to his right.

The unrestricted vistas exhilarated him. There were no fences, no barricades. A low mound followed the road, marking, he supposed, the boundary of the estate. Beyond the road was rolling, blue-green countryside and a glimpse of distant buildings.

The ground rose slowly. As he followed the curve of the road, he could look back and see the arched gate that marked the main entrance—only entrance, as far as he knew. There was a sign over the gate, but by the time he achieved an angle which would have allowed him to read it, he was too far away to make out the letters.

To his left was a wooded hill, from which flowed the stream that eventually crossed the park near his living quarters. To his right was the road, its dark surface stretching into the distance as far as his eyes could follow it. There was no traffic.

He turned impulsively, and walked towards the road.

As he reached the mound, he walked without warning into a solid object. He felt cautiously with his hands, and recognized the substance. It was the same invisible spongy firmness that emanated from his bed plate.

He stepped back. He kicked peevishly at the barrier, and then, in a rush of anger, he leaped forward and started to climb. It was surprisingly easy. Feet and hands pushed into the spongy substance and held. He moved upwards, five feet, ten feet—the thing seemed to have no top at all. He paused and looked uneasily at the ground, clinging tightly to the invisible mass.

He looked again at the tempting, unlimited vistas beyond, and to his surprise a man stood on the far side of the road, watching him. His clothing was a dusky blue-green, obviously a uniform. He carried some kind of weapon, which he held in a rest position. As Corban hesitated, an entire squad of armed men suddenly materialized beside the lone guard. Their attitude was alert, but not belligerent. They watched him, and waited.

Corban scrambled back to the ground. When he turned, the squad of men had disappeared. The guard continued to watch him.

Corban retreated hastily, and sought refuge among the trees of the hilltop. It was a lovely, restful place. Water bubbled out of the ground, and flowed mer-

rily over several small waterfalls on its way down the hill. Delightful, exotic-colored birds fluttered among the large leaves overhead.

Hidden among the foliage, Corban studied the ground beyond the road. In time, he was able to pick out the sentries. They were stationed in various positions of concealment, and their uniforms made them hard to see. But they were there, at regular intervals, as far as he could see in either direction.

He shrugged, and banished the matter from his mind. Mystery had been piled upon mystery for so long that his mental processes refused to contemplate another. He stretched out on the soft grass and watched the birds until he dozed off.

That evening, as strains of music drifted up to Corban's window, he went out and sat down near the musician. It was an elderly man, plucking awkwardly on a crude, three-stringed instrument. He broke off when he saw Corban.

"New, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes," Corban said.

A bystander broke into a torrent of conversation, which Corban followed with difficulty. The gist of it seemed to be that someone working in the office had seen Corban's records. He had been in an accident.

The old man turned to Corban. "What kind of an accident?"

The question placed an undue

strain on Corban's vocabulary. He answered lamely, "A bad accident."

The old man seemed satisfied. He returned to his plucking.

Corban asked a question. "How long have you been here?"

The old man looked up, surprised. There was an odd silence among the dozen or so onlookers. "Always," the old man said.

Corban walked away slowly, with another mystery to plague him. Was there no clue to be had anywhere?

There was the sign over the main entrance. Perhaps it would tell him something, perhaps not, but he had to read it.

At his next language lesson he brought up the subject of the little grove on the hill. "The birds are pretty," he said, irritated at the confines of his vocabulary.

Doctor Alir smiled. "Yes. They are very pretty."

"I like to watch them," he said. "I'd like something to help me watch them."

She frowned, adding an unfamiliar dimension to her beauty. "I don't understand."

With fumbling words and gestures he conveyed the idea of binoculars. His efforts brought him a small tube of startling magnification, but his request for some kind of a bird-watching guide went unsatisfied. Doctor Alir told him reluctantly that there was no such thing.

He followed his route of the

day before, threading his way through the grain field and paralleling the road. When he had progressed far enough so that the gate was visible, he sat down to rest. He had already spotted a sentry, standing motionless in a clump of bushes across the road. He made his movements as natural as possible. He hid the tiny telescope in his hand, and brushed the hand against his face.

The sign above the gate leaped towards him. Part of it he recognized—he'd seen the words in enough places. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. Above this, in larger letters, was a single word.

He moved his hand away, stretched carelessly, and looked again. His lips formed the word. "Raxtinu." He had never seen it before, or heard it.

He got to his feet, and walked slowly towards the grove on the hill. It was possible, he told himself, that it meant something as innocuous as the name on the Lake View Rest Home on Porina, to which an elderly aunt of his had once been dispatched. It was possible, but he doubted it. The Lake View Rest Home had not surrounded itself with force fields and armed guards.

He lay on his back in the grass, watching the charming birds and asking himself for an explanation—any explanation at all. The old man who sang, the others he had met—could they be criminals? They did not seem dangerous in any way. He had never seen a member of the staff



going about armed, and Doctor Alir came to his room without showing any sign of apprehension. The patients—he could only think of himself as a patient—had every freedom within the grounds, and were treated with every consideration. Were they somehow political prisoners?

If so, then why was he here?

"Always," the old man had said.

"Until you recover," Doctor Alir had said.

Recover from what?

When he tired of bird-watching, he wandered off through the fields. From a low rise he saw a distant village. He studied it through his telescope. It seemed to be a normal village, with women going about their tasks, children playing, men coming home from a day's work.

But all wore black.

There was a library in the building, a small room with a pathetically small collection of books. The books were badly printed and clumsily bound, and had it not been for the durable synthetic fabric of the pages Corban would have considered them imports from some low-technology civilization. They were all simply written, and they concerned such innocent subjects as agriculture, or the simple manufacturing which he found some of the patients participating in, or the various diversions. On his request, Doctor Alir found a slender volume

which satisfied his clumsy description of a dictionary.

It confused him immediately, because its organization was not alphabetical. Instead, it seemed to follow some obscure pattern governed, but not entirely governed, by meaning. It was like a word list designed to assist an author of books for beginning readers.

Because it was brief, he went through it quickly. The word Raxtinu did not appear.

The barrier enclosed an enormous area. Corban started out one morning after his lesson with Doctor Alir, and attempted to follow it around its entire circumference. When he turned back, in late afternoon, he had not yet reached the end of the side that paralleled the road. All along the way he saw sentries, and the last stage of his return trip was lighted by a diffused glow that emanated from the barrier as darkness came on. Raxtinu would not be an easy place from which to escape.

He made an evening ritual of sitting out in the park listening to the old man sing. His cracked voice had an appealing sweetness which made up somewhat for his lack of repertory. His songs were childish fables about strange animals, and Corban found them amusing, and compared them with songs he remembered from his own youth. Other patients stopped to listen, grew bored, and drifted on. Corban took little interest in them,

but for a time all of them seemed interested in him. His was a new face, and for some reason he could not account for, new faces were evidently a rarity. This had become obvious.

The attractive younger women took a special, and very direct, interest in him. He reacted awkwardly. As an officer in the space navy, he had been leery of marriage. Months, years of separation did not seem a proper basis for a happy marriage. His commanding officer, Commander Winslow, had thought otherwise. Somehow he considered Corban a bright young officer with a future, and in his opinion nothing was as helpful to a bright young officer as an understanding wife.

"I'm inviting my sister out to visit for a few months," he told Corban. "She's attractive, and she's a fine girl. She and I have always been close together. She'd make a fine wife for a young officer, and I want you to meet her."

That was Commander Winslow's way—there was no subterfuge in his personal relationships. Corban looked at Sylvia Winslow's photo, and had to admit that she was very attractive. Obviously the commander was fanatically devoted to her. Marrying her might help Corban's career in more ways than one, but somehow marriage on that basis did not appeal to him. Of course meeting her would not obligate him in any way, and he could not tell the commander

that he did not choose to become acquainted with his sister.

That was just before he left Qualo Base. He had set off on his last assignment knowing that Sylvia Winslow would be there when he returned, and almost looking forward to knowing her. By this time the commander had probably found another young officer for her.

But Corban did not feel inclined to take one of these patients as a wife, and settle down in one of the small villages he had seen on the grounds. The old man's remark haunted him. "Always." He did not intend to remain at Raxtinu always.

Two male patients wandered out of the dusk and sat down beside him. Corban had not seen them before, and guessed that they were housed in another building. In his wanderings he had seen several spacious dormitories like his own. While the old man sang, they looked at Corban and he studied them.

One of them, dark, middle-aged, had the normal appearance of natives to this planet. The other, younger, almost boyish-looking, possessed flaming red hair, the first that Corban had seen among these people.

The old man finished his song, and indulged in some idle plucking. "New, aren't you?" the redhead asked.

Corban admitted it. It was a routine question—a fellow patient seeing him for the first time would know very well that

he was new, but the question was always asked.

"Name?"

"Paul," Corban said.

The redhead seemed startled. He opened his mouth as though to ask another question, hesitated, and looked at his companion.

The old man broke into the conversation. "He was in an accident. A bad accident."

"I see," the redhead said. "Head injuries?"

"All kinds of injuries," Corban said.

"I understand."

The two men withdrew. They talked guardedly at a distance, and for the rest of the evening they watched him with embarrassing directness. For several days they appeared regularly in the evening, seated themselves near Corban, and watched and listened. Then he saw them no more.

The word was Raxtinu, and he had to find out what it meant. He planned his approach carefully. "In some of the books," he told Doctor Alir, "I find words I don't know. And I don't find them in the word list. Is there a bigger word list somewhere?"

"That is strange," she said. "What are the words? Perhaps I can tell you what they mean."

"I didn't copy them," he said. "I'll do that. But I don't want to bother you every time I find a strange word. Isn't there someplace I could look?"

"There's a master machine in the Director's office. It's for the use of the staff, but perhaps I

could get permission for you to use it occasionally."

"I would appreciate that," Corban said. "I was thinking that as long as there isn't any book about birds, perhaps I could write one. There are many different kinds to watch, here, and bird watching might be a diversion some of the others would enjoy."

"That's an excellent idea. I'll speak to the director."

The machine was wheeled out for him, and placed in a corner of the administrative office. He settled himself in front of it, and staff members regarded him curiously as Doctor Alir explained its use. He blew the dust from its controls, and reflected that the machine was not much used.

He manipulated the dials, and spelled the word meaning *bird*. The screen lit up. The explanation was encyclopedic, and he began to copy names and descriptions of birds.

Doctor Alir left him. The office staff, after a time, began to ignore him with the exception of one young woman who had obviously been instructed to keep an eye on him. She walked over at intervals to ask him if he was having difficulties. Corban patiently copied down information, and waited his chance.

Finally the young woman left the room. The others seemed to be paying no attention to him. Quickly he dialed the word *Raxtinu*, and the screen flashed to life.

"Raxtinu," he read, stumbling over words that were strange to him. "——— for the mentally diseased. The word Raxtin is applied to persons suffering from mental illness, and covers disorders ranging from simple mental deficiency to deficiencies of arruclam, cilloclam . . ."

He scribbled the strange words, changed the setting back to *birds*, and stared at the screen dumbly.

He was in an asylum. They thought he was insane.

### CHAPTER 3

ON A WARM, sunny afternoon that followed a week of rain, Corban realized that he was in love with Doctor Alir. He had decided that some kind of a showdown was necessary on his status, but instead of coming directly to the point, he invited her to watch birds with him. To his intense surprise, she accepted.

Now, sitting in the grove and listening to her talk about the birds, he knew that he loved her. He longed to tumble her towering hair down over her ears and bury his face in its glistening softness, to touch her exquisitely formed nose with his lips, to see her dressed in appropriately feminine garments instead of the shapeless blue smock and trousers.

Not that her beauty was dimmed by a lack of feminine clothing, or by a strange hair styling. She would have been

beautiful no matter what outrage were committed upon her hair, and her sure, graceful movements imparted a life to the doctors' smock that its designer had probably not intended.

Corban could not have imagined himself the victim of a more hopeless love. Even in his own world he was less than a first-rate matrimonial prospect, but at least he had some status there. In her world he was less than nothing. He was a ghastly deficit. He was insane.

He looked upwards glumly as she named the birds and described their habits in her low, musical voice. She knew them all. She knew everything about them. And there was no book on the subject!

"Is something the matter?" she asked.

Everything was the matter. But this seemed as good a time as any to try to do something about it. "What does *arruclam* mean?"

She lowered the telescope and stared at him. You don't know?"

"No," he said.

"You really don't know?"

"No. And—*Cilloclam*. What does that mean?"

She got up abruptly and walked away as far as the edge of the grove, where she stood with her back to him, looking out across the fields. He watched her uneasily.

Finally she turned. "I think we'd better go back."

"All right," he said.

They walked side-by-side down the slope and across the grain field. Several times he glanced sideways at her. Her gaze was fixed solemnly upon the far horizon, and lines of perplexity furrowed her brow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that I don't understand."

She shook her head, and did not reply.

When they reached the building, they went directly to the administrative offices. "Wait here," she said, and disappeared into the inner reaches that were forbidden to all but authorized personnel. Corban settled himself heavily upon an invisible chair.

On the wall opposite, a clock measured off the passing time with its concentric dials. Office personnel lost interest in him, and went silently about their tasks. He buried his face in his hands, and waited.

Suddenly she was back. "Come in, please," she said.

He followed her. A narrow corridor, a turn, another corridor, a doorway. She opened the door for him, and followed him into the private office.

The Director rose from his place at a long table, and smiled. He was one of the doctors who had examined Corban on his arrival—a tall, slender, pleasant-looking man with shrewdly-penetrating blue eyes. Corban had seen him several times since then, without actually knowing who he was.

"You've met Director Wiln be-

fore, haven't you?" Doctor Alir said.

"I believe so," Corban said.

The Director nodded. "Sit down, please."

Corban sat down, and watched the Director thumb through a stack of papers.

"Your record is very complete," the Director said, "except where it matters. According to the hospital reports, you were given the complete series of Buror Tests, and extensive therapy. Is that correct?"

Corban shook his head. "I just don't understand."

"The Buror Tests," the Director said. "Ah—of course the name would not be familiar to you. But certainly you must remember . . ."

He paused, and exchanged glances with Doctor Alir. She left the room, and returned a moment later with a striped balloon.

"Oh, that," Corban said, grimacing at the dismal recollection of lonely days in the hospital.

"Is it familiar to you?"

"Yes. There were two of them."

"And what was your reaction to that phase of the testing?"

"I don't know that I had any reaction. It just didn't make sense to me."

"Yes. Doctor Alir feels that your case has been grossly mishandled, and I'm inclined to agree with her. Certainly the Buror Tests are valueless if the

patient is totally unaware of their purpose. Yes."

He thumbed through the papers again. Corban stole a glance at Doctor Alir, who stood waiting expectantly—for what, he could not imagine.

"Medical science continues to make dramatic advances," the Director said, "but the human brain remains to a certain extent a mystery. You suffered severe head injuries. As a matter of fact, it is something of a miracle that you survived, and it seems that the hospital staff failed to properly assess the possible damage to your memory. We must not be too severe with them. Your case is a rarity in a field where even now our knowledge is largely theoretical, and then—they were not equipped to establish proper communication with you. And we are not entirely blameless, because we accepted their report at face value. Well, then—Doctor Alir recommends that we resume therapy, and I heartily concur. Now that the communication barrier has been eliminated, the results may be entirely different. I promise you that my entire staff will work diligently for your recovery. I trust that we may count on your complete cooperation?"

Corban shook his head bewilderedly, then nodded. "Why, yes . . ."

"Very good. Your therapy will be under the direction of Doctor Alir. As you know, she is extremely capable. That is all."

Corban murmured his thanks,

and Doctor Alir escorted him out. She was smiling brightly. "We'll begin in the morning," she said.

They sat on opposite sides of Corban's room, and on the floor between them lay a striped balloon. "Watch it," Doctor Alir said. "Concentrate on it."

The balloon rose slowly to the ceiling, and sank slowly downwards.

Corban shrugged. "I've seen that before, except that they used two balloons. And I still don't understand. What's the purpose?"

"Watch!" she commanded.

The balloon rose again, moved towards him, moved away, returned to the floor.

"Now," she said, "you do it."

"Do what?"

"Move it upwards."

Corban stared at her blankly.

"Move it upwards," she said again. "*Will* it upwards."

"You mean—my Lord!"

Understanding staggered him. A vague something he dimly recalled from forgotten references and idle conversation of those with time to waste. The wild theories of crackpots. Strange, impossible powers of the mind. Telekinesis!

He found himself on his feet, with no memory of having left his chair. He sat down limply. "You do it with your—with your mind?"

"Of course. I will it to rise."

The balloon rose, and fell.

"Try," she said.

He shrugged despairingly, and focused upon the balloon. Six inches in diameter. Black and white stripes. Resting smugly upon the floor in front of him. Up . . . up . . . up. The effort became painful.

"Concentrate!" she commanded.

He said lamely, "Nothing happens."

"Try again."

He tried. He thrust his entire tortured being at the damning inertness of the balloon. His nails gouged his palms as he clenched his fists, clenched his teeth, tensed his muscles. He relaxed, finally, and mopped the perspiration from his forehead. She was still smiling encouragement.

"You mustn't become discouraged. We can hardly expect results the first time you try. After all, you were in a very severe accident."

"Was I?" he said bitterly.

"Of course. But you might not even recall that. Your memory . . ."

"What else is there?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Those other things—the tests they tried at the hospital. What was I supposed to do?"

"Arruclam is quite enough to start with. Now supposing we try . . ."

"I'd like to know."

"All right. A few experiments, then . . ."

She gazed at him steadily, until he blushed and shifted his

feet uneasily. "Did you hear anything?" she said finally.

"Hear—anything?"

"I was talking to you."

"I didn't—you were talking?"

"Yes. I was talking about the birds."

"With your mind?"

"Certainly. That is the normal way to talk. The spoken language is only for those who have some impairment, or . . ."

"Or who aren't normal!"

She got to her feet. "Shall we look at the birds again? Come here."

Wonderingly, he stood beside her.

"Think, now," she said. "The small clearing beside the stream. Do you remember it?"

He nodded.

"All right. Think about it. Concentrate on it. Now—let's go!"

She was gone.

He backed away slowly, and slumped onto his chair. A moment later she stood before him, looking at him inquiringly.

"You do *that* with your mind?" he said.

"Yes."

"You went out there, just now, where we were yesterday?"

"Yes."

Telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation.

"Is there anything else?"

"Those are the most important things," she said. "We'll work on them. When they come back to you, the other shouldn't be any problem."



When they come back.

"I see," he said. "I'm beginning to understand, now. A lot of things."

She picked up the balloon. "Are you ready to try again?"

"If you don't mind, I'd just like to think about it for awhile."

She was instantly sympathetic. "Certainly. I'll come again in the morning. Shall I leave this here?"

"What? Oh, yes. Leave it here."

She went out, closing the door quietly.

From some dimmed recess of long ago—for it seemed that he had been on this planet for long, bitter years—came the memory of a face. It was an elderly doctor's face, kindly, sympathetic, filled with compassion for the weak and the suffering, and it bent over the young patient in whose behalf the doctor had fought a long and valiant battle with death. And the Gods—whatever Gods this planet might claim—be praised and venerated, for the young man lived, and stirred restlessly in the living death of a prolonged coma, and suddenly he opened his eyes.

The doctor leaned forward eagerly, and said with the jovial gruffness that is the doctor's special trade mark at such moments, "Well, there, young fellow, you're coming along nicely." Or some such thing as doctors say. The next moment his face hardened, and he recoiled in

horror. For this fine young man over whom he had labored so arduously, this good-looking, clean-cut, well-built young man, was an idiot.

That was the way it must have happened, with the two doctors, when Corban regained consciousness, joyously offering congratulations of some kind—telepathic congratulations—and finding that Corban's wondering stare covered total blankness of mind. But they were patient. They conducted tests, they gave him therapy, and as a last extremity they turned to surgery, all in a vain effort to restore the powers he never had.

Then they sadly sent him away to an asylum, to spend the remainder of his life among the idiots of his own kind. The other hopeless ones.

"Always," the old man had said.

It was not surprising that there were cases of mental deficiency even among a people with astonishing mental powers, and as befitted a highly civilized people a place was made for these cases, the incurable cases, where they could live out their lives protected from the tension of existence among their mental superiors. Most of them would be abnormal from birth, and confined to the asylum from an early age, to grow up, marry, spend their lives under confinement. Children? No, they would not be permitted to have children, but there would be children from outside, the mentally defi-

cient children, to be given to the couples who wanted a family.

Accidents that totally destroyed the super-mental powers would be rare among these people, and the adult suddenly thrust into an asylum would be a case to wonder at and talk about.

As his fellow patients had wondered at Corban.

What could he do to avoid that lifetime of confinement? As Doctor Alir had said, he could recover. It was as easy as that. He could develop powers of telekin-esis, and telepathy, and telepor-tation, and whatever else might be expected of a normal person on this world, and obtain his release from the asylum, and perhaps make a career for him-self and marry Doctor Alir and live happily ever after.

They might as well ask him to transmute base metals into gold by breathing on them, or to change his sex and marry the Director — neither of which could be any more difficult than mastering telekinesis, telepathy or teleportation.

The balloon—the damned, mocking balloon—lay on the floor in front of him. He kicked at it savagely, and walked out to the tranquility of the grove to watch the birds.

Doctor Alir appeared promptly the next morning, supremely beautiful, smiling, confident. "Have you been practicing?" she asked.

"No," Corban said.

"Come—you must not give up so quickly. We may have to work on this for a long time."

"It's better that I should tell you," Corban said. "I've never been able to do any of those things. So of course I never will be able to do them. You would be wasting your time."

She stood before him, frown-ing, intensely serious. She had never been lovelier, or more hopelessly unattainable. He had paced the floor for hours, trying to decide what he should do. And he had decided upon a full con-fession.

"Of course you were able to do those things," she said. "Every normal person can do them. Your memory . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with my memory. I can't tell you pre-cisely where I came from, be-cause I don't know. I got lost. But somewhere out among the stars are my people, and among them I'm perfectly normal be-cause none of them can do those things, either."

"The report said you crashed in a spaceship," she murmured, almost incredibly.

"A military ship. I'm an offi-cer in the Space Navy. I got lost, and my fuel was running low, and this was the nearest habit-able planet."

"The report said," she con-tinued softly, "that the ship was of a strange design, but it was so badly damaged that the ex-perts could not learn much about it. It was thought that it might be some kind of an experimental

model, and the government is still trying to trace it."

"There was nothing experimental about it," Corban said. "I've been flying ships like that for—for years."

She seemed amazed, rather than skeptical. "Your people move about among the stars, and still they can't—they aren't able to . . ."

"My people inhabit hundreds of worlds. They're a powerful, advanced people, and they have a wonderful civilization, but if you went among them you'd be as much a freak—as abnormal—as I am here."

Would she believe him? He watched her anxiously, and she frowned again, and shook her head. "Your memory—but you are certain, aren't you? There hasn't been any indication—I mean, you wouldn't invent a thing like that, and think that you remembered it. An inter-planetary civilization?"

He answered her questions flatly. Telekinesis and teleportation were subjects for theoretical speculation among his people, unknown in practice. Telepathy had been a matter for experimentation for perhaps a thousand years or perhaps much longer, and while the evidence indicated that some people possessed telepathic tendencies, no one was telepathic to the extent that telepathy could be used for communication.

"This is terrible!" she said finally.

"Isn't it?"

"I mean, if you remain with us you will have to be confined here. There is a dreadful lack of understanding among the general population. People are so prejudiced against anyone who is mentally handicapped. Life wouldn't be tolerable for you on the outside, and besides, it would be against the law to release you. But if you are quite normal among your own people—why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I was afraid to tell anyone. I thought it might make things worse for me. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you. What difference can it make?"

"It can make all the difference. My people may have their prejudices, but they're not inhospitable to strangers. If the authorities believe you, I'm certain they will make every effort to return you to your own people."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Isn't that what you want?" she said.

To leave the one woman he had ever loved, to never see her again? But they were already separated by a distance that could not be measured in light-years. "Yes," he said. "That's what I want."

"Then I'll speak to the Director."

Corban was called in for another conference. The Director was frankly incredulous. Just where was this inter-planetary civilization? Corban could not say. He had spent hours study-

ing the stars, attempting to establish the position of this planet, but the night sky looked totally strange to him. Now if they had a star chart of the galaxy . . .

"Our astronomy is not exactly in its infancy," the Director said dryly.

But star charts were not in common usage in an asylum for the insane. The Director had to send for one. He called Corban back later in the day, and Corban, exclaiming with delight, spread the enormous chart out on the office floor. The Director and Doctor Alir looked on in astonishment as he traced and described the Galactic Federation — the frontiers, where worlds were being discovered and explored and settled by hardy pioneers, the glamorous, heavily populated regional capitals, the venerable old planet Earth, where the Federation had its seat of government.

The Director said weakly, "These billions of people—you say they're all abnormal?"

Corban smiled icily. "From your point-of-view, I suppose they are. But don't underestimate them. They're doing pretty well for an abnormal people."

"It would seem so," the Director admitted.

"Where is this world located?" Corban asked.

The Director showed him, pointing out the locations of perhaps a hundred planets that formed the Donirian Civilization, far beyond the Federation

frontier. Corban was appalled at the extent to which he had been lost, but he was also amused at the limited reaches of space occupied by these superior people.

"Your civilization can't be very ambitious," he said with a grin.

The Director shrugged. "Growth is not a measure of greatness," he said. "It only indicates a lack of restraint."

Properly chastized, Corban settled back to answer questions about his Galactic Federation. The Director propounded searching questions, shook his head over the answers, and took notes. Would he be sent back to his people, Corban wanted to know when the session was finished. The Director could make no promises. He could only pass the information along to higher authorities, along with Corban's request. But he thought the request entirely reasonable, and he was certain it would receive proper consideration.

"I'm sure they will take action very soon," Doctor Alir said. "We'll miss you."

In his first excitement at the possibility of going home, he attempted to tell some of his fellow patients of his origin. They heard him out silently, shrugged, and turned away. What happened beyond the barrier that surrounded the asylum did not concern them.

The days were tedious, now. There were no more mysteries to ponder. There were no more

lessons from Doctor Alir. He saw her frequently. He had learned enough of her daily routine to make certain that their paths crossed often. But her duties were many; and he no longer had a special claim upon her time. Often he regretted that he had spoken to her of his origin. He could have waited, and pretended to be working hard with her therapy, and received her personal attention perhaps indefinitely. His confession could have been postponed until his case was officially hopeless again.

But that would have been deceitful, and an honorable man, he told himself, is not deceitful with a woman he loves.

The days passed. He spent much of his time in the grove on the hill, and he was lying there near a small waterfall, dreamily listening to the rushing stream, when he saw two patients walking across the field towards him.

As they came nearer he caught the flash of red hair, and recognized them. They were patients he had seen in the park several times, shortly after his arrival. They stopped when they saw him, talked briefly, and then came forward. He got to his feet and waited for them.

They came up to him slowly. He gave them the Donirian greeting, but they did not reply. The redhead's face was pale and contorted, as though he were violently ill. The older man

avoided Corban's eyes, fingered one sleeve nervously, and stood rocking from one foot to the other.

"Were you looking for something?" Corban asked.

The redhead leaped forward. "You!" he screamed. "You traitor!"

His fist smashed into Corban's face, sending him reeling backwards. He tripped over a root, and sprawled on the ground. He lay there dazed, not from the blow, but from the words.

The words were spoken in Galactic, the official language of the Galactic Federation.

Choking with rage, the redhead sprang after him. He kicked viciously at Corban, and would have flung himself down on him if his companion had not caught him and hauled him backwards.

The redhead buried his face in his hands, and wept. "We should kill him," he sobbed. "We should kill him."

"It wouldn't help anything," the other said wearily. "It wasn't his fault."

Corban got up slowly. "You're from the Federation?" he asked.

The older man nodded sadly. "If we had known, if we had only known, this wouldn't have happened. The name Paul—that should have told us. But that business about an accident seemed so plausible that it threw us off. It's our fault, really. We should have taken a chance. A few words in Galactic wouldn't have hurt anything. If you didn't

understand, that would have been that. We should have tried it. Now it's too late."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Would you mind telling me . . ."

"Sure," the redhead said bitterly. "We'll tell you. You're a traitor."

"That won't help," the other murmured. "What's your last name, Paul?"

"Corban."

"Paul Corban. This is Miles Fletcher, and I'm Roger Froin. I've been in this asylum for about twenty-four years, Galactic time. Fletcher has been here for about two. There are ten of us, altogether—ten from the Federation, who got out this far for one reason or another, and were classified as idiots, and confined here. Most of the patients are committed when they're children, so it's rare that an adult is brought in. It only happens once a year, or so, and that makes it about fifty-fifty that the adult is from the Federation. I've been contacting all the new adults for years, and if they're from the Federation we work them into our group. In your case—we should have tried. But that accident . . ."

"I rather wish you had," Corban said. "This is a lonely place, you know. But I can't see that it matters much now."

"Why did you do it?" the redhead demanded.

"Do what?"

"Tell the hospital staff where you were from?"

"Surely there's no harm in that," Corban said. "Doctor Alir, and the Director, think the government will make arrangements to send me back. That means all of us can go back. Don't you want to go home?"

"You don't understand these people," Froin said. "Your only experience of them was in a hospital, where they probably tried to cure you, and here at the asylum, where the staff has a special interest in idiots, and is wonderfully humane and sympathetic. Those on the staff don't flaunt their superiority, you know. You never catch them using *psi* powers, though they probably talk telepathically all the time."

"But the general population despises us. We're something unclean. Something rotten. I was beaten up three times before I got into the hands of someone kind enough to send me here, and one of those times nearly killed me. Haven't you stopped to wonder why people who are perfectly normal mentally except for the absence of *psi* powers are confined here with an army to guard them? It's because they are considered criminally unfit to associate with the rest of the population. To the Donirians, a mind that doesn't respond telepathically is a terrifying thing. It is a raving mad mind, a dangerous mind, something impossible to comprehend. The same goes for the other *psi* powers. That's why we've guarded our

origin so carefully, and accepted this imprisonment without protest."

"They seemed kind enough," Corban said. "The doctors . . ."

"You'd expect the doctors to possess at least an iota of enlightenment on the subject of mental disease, wouldn't you? But you haven't met the general population. You were fortunate in that respect. We know of several of our people who never got as far as this asylum. They were killed—lynched is the word, isn't it?—by the first Donirians they met. That's how humane these people are."

"You told them all about the Federation?" the redhead asked.

"Yes," Corban admitted.

"You told them where it was?"

"I—yes."

"Don't you see what you've done? If the authorities believe you, they'll be appalled. They'll be utterly horrified, because you've described an entire interplanetary civilization populated exclusively by the criminally insane. They won't be able to tolerate a threat like that. They'll take their superior science, and go to war. And they won't quit until they've exterminated the Federation. It means the end of the human race."

Corban stepped back, and leaned against a tree. "Is it as bad as that?"

"I'm afraid it is," Froin said. "They'll put our people in cages like this one, and prevent their reproducing, or else they'll kill

them. But one way or another, they'll purge the galaxy of ordinary men."

"I didn't realize."

"It wasn't your fault. We should have contacted you. It was bound to happen sooner or later anyway, the way the Federation is expanding, but we wanted to prevent it as long as we could. The more time we could give the Federation, the more chance there was that it would develop new weapons, and God knows it's going to need everything it can get."

"I suppose there's nothing we can do now."

"I don't know," Froin said. "Do you think you could convince them you were lying? An interplanetary civilization made up of idiots might sound pretty fantastic to them. Maybe they'd believe you if you said you made it up."

"I'll try."

Froin gripped Corban's shoulder. "Do your best. It's tough being a hero, or a martyr, when no one will ever know about it. Believe me, I know, because I've been working at it for a long time. But this may be the last chance you'll ever have to do something for your fellow men. And remember this—no matter what they believe, they won't send you back. They won't go near our demented civilization unless they mean to destroy it."

They separated at the foot of the slope, and Corban hurried back to his own building. He went directly to the administra-



tive offices. The Director was not available. Doctor Alir was not available. He left word that he would like to see Doctor Alir, and went to his room.

He was lying on his bed, staring despondently at the ceiling, when she appeared before him. As he got to his feet she threw herself into his arms and wept brokenly with her head on his shoulder.

For a moment he forgot the hopelessness of his love for her, forgot everything except her presence in his arms. But his mind refused to accept a miracle unchallenged, even a miracle that bridged the distance between them.

"What is it?" he whispered. "What's the matter?"

She sobbed out her story. Corban's request had reached the highest government authorities. They had considered it carefully, they had tested its authenticity, and retested it, and convinced themselves that it was true. Now they were determined to act upon it.

And the action would be war upon his world.

#### CHAPTER 4

THE *Silver Flash* was an 11C courier ship on a routine mission. It carried a crew of two, the extra man being a concession to a recently concluded and violently damning investigation. It also reflected the military's own concern over a rash of un-

explained disappearances of the tiny ships.

The *Silver Flash* was on course parallel to, and well inside, the Dropoff, which was the name the navy men gave to the boundary of officially surveyed and charted space. Ensign Carter, on the controls, listened morosely to the resounding snores sent up by Ensign Devine from the ship's one bunk, and muttered to himself.

"The navy," he thought, "must be run by idiots. The brass hats sat on their hands until enough men had been lost, and then they conceded that a one-man courier ship wasn't safe. So what did they do—build a two-man ship? No. They put two men in a one-man ship. One man, operating at peak efficiency, couldn't handle the thing. So naturally two men, operating at maybe half efficiency, should get along fine."

He struck the instrument panel a jolting blow, and then looked anxiously at Devine. Devine continued to snore.

"I should have joined the postal service," Carter muttered. "The postal service would never dare pull a gaffe like this one. Even if it cares no more for its men than the navy does, at least it has to take good care of the mail."

So intense, so bitter was his reverie, that it took a warning shout from Devine to rouse him to the fact that his control panel was urgently clamoring for his attention.

"What is it?" Devine asked.

Carter stared at his instruments, rotated the scanner, and swore violently. "Was there anything in the drip pan about the fleet being on maneuvers out this way?"

"Nothing I heard about."

"Well, it is."

"Nonsense! The 1105th Squadron is still at Qualo Base. The 1392nd is headed down Gurnoy way. They wouldn't hold maneuvers around here without cutting those two squadrons in on it."

"They are," Carter said. "At least . . ."

Devine scrambled down from the bunk, kicked Carter's head in the process, and banged his own head on the chart rack when he tried to twist aside. "At least what?" he demanded.

Carter spoke awesomely. "At least it's *somebody's* fleet."

"So it is," Devine murmured, staring at the scanner. "It's somebody's, but it isn't ours. Those ships are flatish, see, and the big ones are humpbacked. Look—they're turning to cut us off! Turn this crate. Turn it! Fan those jets, brother, while I get off a message."

The perspiring Carter worked frantically over his controls while Devine snapped out a message. "*Silver Flash* 11C-964B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay. *Silver Flash* 11C-964B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay. Urgent. Unknown battle fleet sighted position . . .

on course . . . Estimated fifty ships battle cruiser size and larger, with auxiliaries. Ships have flatish shape, larger ships have weapon or observation turret topside. We are now being pursued. Repeat. We are now being pursued. Them big ships are *really* big. Out."

He glanced at Carter. "How are we doing?"

"If you know a real, potent prayer, start praying."

"We're in range. Hell, we were in range when we first sighted them. Wonder why they don't shoot."

"We don't know what range their weapons have."

"That's a thought," Devine said. "Might be important. I'll pass it along. Anything else?"

"Maybe they don't want to shoot. Maybe they want to capture us."

"If this means war," Devine said, "and it sure as hell does with an alien battle fleet cruising in Federation territory, they'll want prisoners. But right now surprise should be more important. They should want to shut us up before we talk. If I was them, I'd have fired on initial contact. Are they still gaining?"

"They are."

"They've waited too long. Someone will pick us up. But just in case—*Silver Flash* 11C-986B46 calling Qualo Base and all listening stations to record and relay . . ."

Green fire bubbled in front of them. Carter yelped and changed.

course. Devine grimly worked a description of the effect into his message, and signed off.

"That was a warning," Carter said. "They want us to surrender. What do you think?"

"I can't say I'm enthused about it. God knows how many years a war will last, and maybe even God doesn't know what sort of creatures these aliens might be. Years of slavery in their prison camp wouldn't appeal to me."

"Too bad the navy didn't see fit to arm these flitters."

"Right," Devine said. "I wouldn't mind going down fighting, if there was something to fight with."

"There is."

"What?"

"The *Silver Flash*."

"Mmm—not bad. If we banged one of those big ships in the vicinity of its drive we'd be sure to put it out of action. If we were lucky, we might even..."

The green fire bubbled again. "Turn back?" Carter said. "Right. It wouldn't be a bad trade. The two of us and an 11C for one of those bloated battle cruisers and crew. Not to mention possible damage to nearby ships. Not bad at all."

Devine was getting off another message. He described the ships and the composition of the fleet in detail, and estimated maximum speed shown in pursuit. "Last message," he said calmly. "Capture certain. Will attempt collision course with largest battleship, which we

hope will be command ship. Give our best to our next of kin. Out."

"What was that for?" Carter said.

"So my old mother'll receive a medal," Devine said soberly. "Now—we'd better lay this out carefully. We won't get more than one chance."

A few minutes later, as the *Silver Flash* apparently slowed to receive boarders, it suddenly spurted, veered crazily, and darted off through the enemy formation to plummet into the largest battleship. The searing, consuming flash that followed rocked the nearby ships and holed their hulls with death-dealing debris.

From a ship far to the rear, the fleet's vice-commander flashed an urgent thought at his superior officer, and got no response. His next thought notified the various unit commanders of his assumption of the command. "We were informed," he remarked stoically, "that these creatures are mentally degenerate. In the future such maniacal acts must be anticipated."

## CHAPTER 5

THERE may have been a more beautiful place somewhere—the Fire Islands of Wrannis, for example, or the Fern-Lake area on one of the small planets of the Hinlin Group—but when the sunlight lay full upon the giant planet Orn, and its swirling, tumbling gasses tossed off a riotous kaleidoscope of vividly

blended colors, visitors to the small satellite called Rainbow's End watched with bated breath, and remarked, without daring to look away, that there never had been beauty like this.

Stockholders of Rainbow's End Resort, Incorporated, told themselves confidently that someday the little moon would be the most prosperous resort in the galaxy. Now it was a modest-priced stop at the end of a long space excursion. But honeymooners and retired couples were discovering it, and the future looked bright.

For Sue Corban Lyle, comfortable with her husband's arms about her and the wonders of Orn performing for her just beyond the plastic observation dome of their honeymoon suite, the future looked very bright indeed. The present would have been perfect, too, except . . .

"Do you think we could?" she asked.

Jim Lyle patted her shoulder, and announced himself willing to conquer all for the happiness of his bride. "It'll take a bit of doing, but if you want to go, we'll go."

"I do want to. We were very close, Paul and I. I knew he wouldn't be able to come to the wedding, but it's so strange that he wouldn't at least write, or send congratulations, or something. I thought maybe he'd surprise us and see us here, because it really isn't so terribly far from Qualo Base, and of course I told him we were coming here."

"We've got lots of time," Jim Lyle said. "Why don't we wait another week? And then if you haven't heard anything we can decide what to do. A navy man can't always get away just when he wants to."

"Thank you, darling," she whispered, and met his lips tremulously.

Jim Lyle caressed his bride soothingly, and managed to conceal the disturbing turmoil his own emotions were undergoing. For he had been personally convinced that this new brother-in-law of his was behaving very much like a cad towards his favorite sister, so he had gotten off a message early in their stay on Rainbow's End, and when it went unanswered he'd sent another message to the Qualo Base commanding officer.

That morning he had the reply. Paul Corban was missing—had been missing for months—and while the galaxy was a large place and missing men not infrequently turned up safe after long absences, he could only be presumed dead, and his family had been so informed.

Lyle understood, then, that Sue's parents had kept that sad news from her so that her wedding could be free from tragedy. He also knew that she would have to be told about it before they left Rainbow's End; otherwise she would insist on stopping off at Qualo Base on their way home. But he would postpone it as long as he could.

"Jim!" Sue exclaimed. "Look up there!"

Lyle looked. The sky was filled with ships.

## CHAPTER 6

GENERAL Thadeus O'Conner was worried. All hell had broken loose along the frontier and seemed headed directly at him. A three-pronged attack was due to converge on this planet of Willar within the next few days. The invaders were gobbling up planets with incredible ease—all resistance on Zernik was overcome, the reports said, in less than ten hours.

All resistance. Ridiculous! There should have been valliant pockets of resistance fighting hard and severely embarrassing the enemy for weeks after a planet capitulated. But there weren't. Not on Zernik, and not anywhere else the invaders touched down.

And now they had carved out a neat chunk of Federation territory and were due to converge on Willar. O'Conner's 392nd Corps had been reinforced. Somewhere out yonder the 1105th Naval Squadron was waiting, either to intercept or to catch the enemy in an embarrassing position as its fleet moved in. But O'Conner was not deceived.

You do not match one corps, however reinforced, and one squadron of the fleet, against three converging enemy fleets transporting an army of untold

power and numbers. That is, you do not if you expect to win. O'Conner's corps, and the 1105th Squadron, were expendible. They were expected to inflict a maximum of punishment on the enemy, and to hold out heroically as long as possible. They were expected to give the invaders a severe battle test, to amass information on enemy weapons and tactics, and to exact a horrifying cost for this unfortunately important planet. In the meantime, somewhere to the rear, the fleet was massing, the army was erecting fortifications, and the high command was laying its plans for a war of survival.

O'Conner's corps had been hand-picked for the job, and he supposed it was an honor, if a death sentence could be considered an honor. And now—how to do the job?"

"Captain William Corban is here," his communicator announced.

"Send him in," O'Conner said.

The captain entered, and saluted smartly. His young face had a look of crushing weariness; his left arm was in a sling. O'Conner gestured towards a chair, and Corban slumped into it, and then brought his shoulders erect.

"Relax, Captain," O'Conner said. "You've earned a rest, but unfortunately we've got work to do. I've been waiting for you. I suppose you have some understanding of our mission here."

"I've drawn my own conclusions, sir," Corban said.

"In that case, it was brave of you to volunteer," O'Conner said dryly. "How many of you got away from Zernik?"

"About forty, sir. One ship. There may have been others, but I didn't hear of any."

"Neither did I," O'Conner said. "But headquarters should have been able to spare us more than one. I suppose they are diligently picking the brains of the others. Corban, what the devil are we fighting?"

"Zombis," Corban said without hesitation. "We had a defense line on Zernik. We were supposed to contain their landing area. As soon as the fighting began we were being attacked front and rear."

"Then it's true that they're something more than human. Or less."

"It's true. They use no radios, but their communications are obviously very good. Telepathy. They pop at you from out of nowhere. Blink your eyes, and there's a damned company charging in where you were unopposed a second before. Teleportation. They snatched one of our field pieces right out of the hands of the crew, and moved it forty yards—without touching it or being anywhere near it. And then they started using it on us. Telekinesis. There may be more, but those were the most obvious things."

"What about their weapons?"

"Strictly mediocre, sir. But with soldiers like that they don't need superior weapons."

"If our stuff is better," O'Conner mused, "they'll probably be using it. They've captured enough. Well—how do we fight them?"

"I know how I'd fight them, sir." Corban looked levelly at the general. "I'd blanket this whole damned planet with small defensive perimeters. You can't set up a line of defense against them. One minute after the battle starts you're defending from both directions. But a small perimeter, with men arranged in concentric circles, should hold out as long as its supplies last. The outer circle would be the defense line. The inner circles would only deal with the Zombis that popped up inside the perimeter. The artillery would be placed in the center, where the Zombis would be less likely to steal it. They don't seem to be able to snatch field guns until a crowd of them gets within fifty yards or so."

O'Conner raised his hands helplessly. "I have ten divisions. It's a small planet, but ten divisions won't blanket it."

"You don't need a lot of men in each position, sir. Even a battalion might be too large. If the position takes in too much area, your inner defense would be too scattered and the Zombis would get inside. A couple of companies would be best. The positions could be sited so the ranges of their guns would overlap."

O'Conner tilted back, and pawed fretfully at what was left

of his hair. "It's an idea. Matter of fact, it's the only idea we have, so far. My staff is meeting now. Let's go throw it at them. What we'll probably have to do is set up these perimeters as far as we can, and concede the rest of the planet."

"If I may ask a personal question, sir—is there any news from Qualo Base?"

"Not that I know of. It was a bit off the Zombis' main line of advance. The last I heard it hadn't even been attacked. These Zombis may have supernatural powers, but they fight a very conservative kind of war. Why do you ask?"

"My kid brother is stationed at Qualo. An ensign. With Qualo right out on the Dropoff, I've been worried about him."

"Things have been quiet there, so far. But I'd be glad to inquire. Name?"

"Ensign Paul Corban. But don't bother, sir. If Qualo hasn't been attacked, he's probably all right."

## CHAPTER 7

SUE CORBAN LYLE leaned on her hoe, and brushed her hair back carelessly. Her face and arms were tanned and peeling, her hands rough and dirty. Her feet were bare. She wore a thin, sack-like dress; nothing else.

The patch of vegetables to which she had been assigned dipped down into a small valley, and she stood there now, beside

a tiny stream. She tried to plan her work so that she could be in the valley during the heat of mid-day. It was cooler there, and she welcomed the seclusion as much as the coolness. It took her away from the idle chatter of the women working nearby, and also out of sight of the inhuman soldiers who kept springing out of nowhere and pausing to stare lewdly at the body her thin dress revealed only too plainly. So she could be alone with her thoughts, and rest a little, too.

Jim. She wondered where Jim was now—what he was doing. She was sure he must be all right, wherever he was. He had to be all right! And—none of the women had been harmed. The soldiers had torn her from Jim's arms, and he had been herded into one ship and she into another, and that was the last she had seen of him.

Sue's ship had taken the women to this planet, which was not an unpleasant place, but the soldiers had made it brutally clear that they had not been brought there to enjoy it. They were assigned beds in large dormitories, and put to work in the fields, and as the days passed an unending procession of ships arrived, always loaded with women.

They had to work hard, but they were treated kindly enough and they had plenty to eat, and if she only knew how Jim was . . .

She turned quickly. One of



the strange soldiers stood nearby, leering at her. She backed away in terror. She'd never seen one here before, and he had found her not working, and now maybe she'd have to go a day without food, like some of the women had when they hadn't worked hard enough.

He walked slowly after her.

"What—do you want?" she gasped, though she knew it was no use talking to him, because they never talked at all.

He looked about cautiously, and suddenly he lunged at her. She screamed and fought wildly, but he hurled her to the ground and ripped away her dress. Then, as suddenly as he had come, he was gone.

She raised herself to a sitting position. Her assailant stood a short distance away, cringing in evident terror. There was another soldier there, an officer, and as Sue watched the officer calmly drew a weapon and shot the soldier dead. He disappeared without a glance at Sue.

"Don't think anything of it, dearie," an older woman said later, as Sue sobbed out her story. "He didn't hurt you any, and it's just as well for you he didn't. Otherwise, you might have been shot, too."

"But why?" Sue gasped.

"Don't you understand? Plain as the nose on your face. Besides, my girl Dot works over at their headquarters, and they're teaching her their language, and she knows all about it. It's death for any soldier that touches one

of us, and it might be death for the woman. They think they're pretty all-fired superior creatures, and they don't want their blood mixed with ours. Soon as they can, they're going to get women here to guard us, so there won't be any risk after that happens.

"And," the woman went on, "it ain't no coincidence that they're bringing all their women prisoners here, and putting all the men over on Frains. Woe to the man that's found here, and woe to the woman that's found over there. You see, they ain't going to have us mixing our own bloods, either."

## CHAPTER 8

"THE Major," Private Maneski said, "is a queer one."

"Maybe it's because he hasn't been a major long," Private Cushman said.

Private Maneski sighted along his rifle. The ground sloped gently away from the trench. A small stream meandered across the stubby pasture below him. The landscape was hot and barren enough in daylight, but the artificial moonlight gave it a dim touch of calm beauty. Somehow it reminded him of home. He sighed, and sighted again along his rifle. He had all of the boulders in his field of fire memorized. There was nothing else to see, and certainly nothing to fire at.

"Wish those goats would come

back," Cushman said. "We could have fresh meat."

"You have fresh meat twice a day."

"But it won't last. It never does. And I have a degrading hunch that this is going to be a long war."

"The major is queer," Maneski said, "because he got away from Zernik after what must have been one rousing hell of a slaughter, and the first thing he did was volunteer to come here and get put through it again."

"That doesn't make him queer," Cushman said. "That makes him batty. No sane man . . ."

He broke off because striding along the trench came Major William Corban on his nightly inspection jaunt. He paused to speak a few words to each team, and Maneski and Cushman waited stiffly for his sharp attention to fall upon them.

In Maneski's estimation, the major was all right. He was fair, and he seemed to know what he was doing. According to the drip pan, the queer defense pattern that had been set up over as much of the planet as there were men to cover was Corban's idea, and General O'Conner had offered him a soft staff assignment, which he had declined. It was a comfort to be under the command of the one man on Wil- lar who knew anything about these weird invaders. On the other hand, Maneski was becoming a bit tired of the major's nightly lecture. After hearing it

repeated a couple of dozen times, he felt that he could quite competently deliver it himself.

"Remember, men—" Maneski shuddered. How could he forget? "—the enemy will strike without warning. There will be nothing at all out in front of you, and suddenly they will be attacking. The first time they hit a position they seem a bit confused about its location, and they are widely scattered. In later attacks they show a sharp improvement.

"If you are alert and watching your assigned territory carefully, you will see a slight blur, like heat waves refracting the light. When you see that blur, don't hesitate. Aim and fire. By the time you pull the trigger the enemy will be there. Don't worry about the enemy that pops out behind you. The defensive position is laid out to take care of that. The men behind you will keep the circle clear, and there will never be many of the enemy inside the circle unless you are slow on the trigger. If you give the Zombis in front of you a chance to get set, they'll disappear and make another jump, and on a short jump they're pretty accurate. We'll have more of them inside the circle than we can handle, and we'll be in trouble."

After the first time the major had given his little speech, blurs had been sighted all over the landscape, and duly fired at. None of them, however, had

materialized into Zombis. Now there was an air of skeptical tension along the trench.

Major Corban halted beside Maneski, climbed the firing step, and stood looking out over the peaceful countryside. "Quiet tonight," he said.

"Yes, sir," Maneski said, steeling himself for the lecture.

"Keep alert. They've been attacking all around us."

"Yes, sir," Maneski said dutifully.

The major jerked suddenly, snatched at his belt. Before the startled Maneski could quite comprehend what was happening he had aimed—aimed at nothing—and fired. And as he fired, a figure materialized on the edge of the trench, clawed futilely at the air, and fell choking onto the damp sand at the bottom.

"Here they come!" the major shouted. "Get to work, men."

Maneski raised his rifle bewilderedly. A figure snapped into view, roughly in line with his sights but at an absurd range. As it crouched and threw up an odd, glittering weapon, Maneski pulled the trigger. The figure pitched forward, and he gave a yelp of excitement. The surprise had passed, and men were leaning forward grimly, getting off aimed shots. A series of *whumps* sounded behind them as the mortars laid down an atomic barrage, then desisted because no concentration of the enemy remained in place long

enough for high-trajectory fire to be effective. The Zombis were shot as soon as they appeared, or they were gone.

Maneski fired at another, saw him fall. "Ten," he muttered, slapping his rifle with satisfaction. There seemed to be a momentary lull. He chanced to look behind him, and stared full into the yawning end of a Zombi rifle. He leaped aside frantically, the charge snapped over his head, and the Zombi fell dead at his feet. Maneski took in the scattering of dead bodies within the circle, and grinned his satisfaction.

Incredibly, the fight was over. Rifle fire slackened, and died out. One of Maneski's buddies climbed out on the edge of the trench, with a tall black hat perched on top of his helmet. ("Now where did he get that?" Maneski wondered. "Probably stole it out of a museum.") He went through a series of ludicrous gymnastics. Men laughed, and slapped each other's backs.

Maneski took off his helmet, and mopped his face. "Wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

Cushman did not answer.

Maneski turned, took in the crumpled form slumped back against the soft earth, and gasped, turned violently ill. Cushman's shocked eyes stared at him over a mask of frothy red. Blood bubbled richly from a horrid, gaping wound that had swallowed up the lower half of his face. His jaw was gone, and his upper teeth and part of his nose.

His blood-clotted hands tore futilely at the opening, and as Maneski screamed, "Medic!" he pitched forward.

Major Corban's sharp voice carried along the trench. "A good fight, men. But remember—this is only the beginning. They'll be back."

## CHAPTER 9

GENERAL O'CONNER leaned back in his chair, picked up a stack of reports, and planted his feet on his desk with deliberate precision. "If I were the enemy," he announced, "I'd forget about this lousy planet, and look for something easier."

"Yes, sir," the adjutant said.

The general slammed down the papers, and swore. "I never should have allowed a psychologist on my staff. What's eating you now?"

"They're supermen, sir. Superior beings. They know that, and we know that. There's just no getting away from it."

"The way things are going, they can have their superiority. We've been at this for over a month, and they've suffered five hundred casualties to our one, and that's just counting their dead. We don't know about their wounded, because as soon as they're hit they disappear. Probably they pop themselves back to an aid station or whatever the enemy has, and get patched up. But five hundred dead, they've had, for each one of our dead or wounded. Our supply

ships are getting through, and we're really in better shape now than we were when this thing started. You think they're going to fight us to the finish at a cost of five hundred to one?"

"I don't know what they're going to do, but they can't give up. Their superiority won't let them. They don't dare have a failure at this stage of the war. It'd be a terrible let down for them, and a big boost for us. It's like their weapons. Ours are better, and they've captured plenty of them, but they don't use them. They must order their men not to use them, because only rarely in battle will one of their men pick up a weapon of ours and fire it. They haven't got anything that passes for land artillery, and they really need some, but they won't use captured pieces. They must have some kind of complex. They don't want to think anything of ours is better than theirs, and they don't want us to think it. That it is either."

O'Conner chuckled, and picked up the papers again. "Right now they'll have a tough time keeping me from thinking it. Five hundred to one—it's unbelievable. Sector command thinks I'm joking."

There was a mild disturbance outside the door, culminating in a scorching outburst of profanity. The door opened, and a colonel came in, grinning broadly.

"What is it, Leblanc?" O'Conner said.

"Intelligence is having a rough time."

"This is something new?"

"Ever since this started they've been yelping about getting a prisoner to interrogate. Well, they finally got one."

"They *did*! How?"

"Colonel Corban sent one over. Intelligence appealed to him, and he said he'd see to it personally, and he did."

O'Conner grinned. "Corban would. How did he do it?"

"One of the Zombis popped out near his command post, and Corban tackled him and knocked him cold. They souped him up with sedatives, and shipped him over."

"That should make intelligence real happy. What was the fuss?"

"Why, as soon as the Zombi came to he took one look around the room and disappeared. He popped up outside, right in front of a sentry, as luck would have it, and the sentry happened to be an infantry veteran who'd seen a lot of Zombis. He bashed him over the head with a rifle butt, and delivered him back to intelligence. They didn't take any chances with him, after that. They took him down to a maximum security cell, and strapped him down, and put irons on him, and had three guards sitting there with their hands on him. And as soon as he opened his eyes he disappeared again."

O'Conner exploded. "Damnation! You mean I've got a Zombi loose in my headquarters?"

"Nope. Sentry spotted him outside when he popped out. Too far away for any bashing, so he let him have it. Scratch one Zombi. But intelligence is having a hemorrhage."

"Yeah. Can't see that it matters, though."

"It would be nice to know who we're fighting," the colonel said wistfully. "Where they come from, and how many there are of them, and that sort of thing."

"I'll tell you one thing. There are a lot fewer of them than there were a month ago."

"It'll take a long time for us to even things up. They got a lot of our men when they first hit. Civilians, too."

O'Conner patted his reports affectionately. "At this rate, it won't take so long." His confidence was almost reassuring.

The general finished his desk work, and went off to visit field troops. His staff always argued against it. Certainly it seemed unsafe to be whisking about in small planes in a situation where the enemy was everywhere, and every one of his small defensive positions was, at frequent intervals, under siege. But no planes had been lost, as yet, not even any of the hard-worked supply planes. And O'Conner was a realist. He was fighting a brilliantly successful delaying action, but his command was still expendable, and his men were not fools. They knew it, and they would fight better if they knew

that their commanding officer was expendible, too.

Today it was Corban's circle, and O'Conner arrived just in time to see the end of a minor flurry of action. His plane slid down safely into the landing pit, and he climbed up to Corban's observation post.

"Nothing much," the young colonel said. "We got about fifty. I don't think there were any survivors."

"Have you noticed any change in tactics of late?"

"Oh, they keep changing tactics all the time. This time they massed the entire attack on one point. It's the first time they've done that, and it's the first time we've been able to use automatic weapons with any real effect. We just mowed 'em down. They probably won't try that again."

O'Conner swept the horizon with his binoculars, and turned with a frown. "Where are they?"

"Who? Oh, you mean—well, it got awfully uncomfortable around here, with all those dead bodies piled up. The smell, you know. It's been rather warm. So I'm having a fatigue detail carry the bodies down south of here. There's a deep draw down there that's pretty well protected. None of our guns can touch it except the mortars. So we're filling it up with dead Zombis."

"Everybody's having the same problem," O'Conner said. "Someone in Supply got some goop mixed up that burns dead bodies

efficiently without much smoke. If you'd like to try it . . ."

"Why, thanks, sir. But we'd rather just dump them in the draw."

"Kind of risky for your fatigue detail, isn't it?"

Corban grinned. "We have a few tricks worked out. I'll admit it's still a little unpleasant when the wind is just right, but that draw is kind of important to us. The Zombis were quick to spot the fact that they wouldn't be under observation there, so they've taken to using it as an assembly area. They mass there, and then they all come at us at once. They hit us out of there with the best part of a division, once, and it was rough while it lasted. It was then that we figured out what they were doing. So we've been carting their dead over there, and we figure it won't help their moral any to start an attack from an assembly area filled with their own dead. We've tossed some other gimmicks at them, too. Like—we have some mikes buried over there, and wired in here."

"Zombis don't talk," the general said.

"No, but when they walk around they make about as much noise as anyone else. And if they don't, we have some boobie traps set to help them out. Then, when we know they're there, we have the mortars lay down a nice atomic barrage. The more we kill over in that draw, the fewer bodies we have to carry back. Dirty, isn't it?"

"War generally is," O'Conner growled. "Let's go see your men."

The position had changed drastically since the early days. Trenches were roofed over, and protected by a mound of dirt from fire from the circles to the rear. Underground tunnels connected the circles. The Zombis had yet to make an appearance in a trench or tunnel, but Corban had controls set up, just in case. The men had carved comfortable living quarters out of the ground, and scrounged furnishings from abandoned houses in the area. O'Conner surprised one private lounging in an overstuffed chair, reading by artificial light. As the general gaped at the draperies and pictures covering the wall, the private explained, "We figure it's going to be a long war, sir."

O'Conner left Corban's command in a happy frame of mind. He'd have to do something about Corban, he thought. The man was just too good to leave in charge of a couple of companies of infantry. Sector Command might be irked about his making a general out of anyone so young, but he doubted that there would be any squawks. Not when the credit for the Willar success belonged to Corban.

On his return to headquarters, he found Captain Dormeyer, his alert young naval aid, waiting for him. "Could you come down to communications, sir?" Dormeyer said.

O'Conner nodded. He had almost been expecting this. He'd been worried about the war in space. It was none of his responsibility, but Admiral Rucker's attitude . . .

He was handed a message from the commander of the 1105th Squadron. "Outnumbered, proceeding with strategic withdrawal."

"So," O'Conner said. "We're expendible, but the navy isn't."

Dormeyer had tears in his eyes. "It's stupidity—criminal stupidity. He could have screened us indefinitely. He didn't have enough ships to keep out their small transport and supply units, but he could have held off the main fleet. Our guns out-range theirs, and no matter how much he was outnumbered, there's a limit to how many ships can be used effectively in a given hunk of space."

O'Conner patted him on the back consolingly. "It's done, now. He can't come back. The Zombis can stand him off as easily as he could have stood them off. More easily, because they have five times as many ships. We'll get off a stiff complaint to Sector Command, and forget about it. Probably we've seen our last supply ship. How's the ground-to-space arsenal?"

"Not so hot."

"We didn't think we'd need much. Well, we'll do what we can, and hold out as long as we can, which should be quite a while."

O'Conner was hauled out of



bed that night by a trembling aid, as frightened as he was apologetic. "Look, sir," he whispered.

O'Conner looked into the brooding blackness of a gathering storm, and saw a long line of green fire split the sky.

"At first we thought it was lightning," the aid said. "And then when the reports started to come in . . ."

"The Zombi fleet, firing in support of ground troops. It figures. We've been offering daily prayers of thanks because they had no ground artillery support, and it has finally dawned on them that they need some. So they're using the main batteries of the space fleet. It's about as efficient as trying to hit a pin at ten miles, but if they keep at it they'll have some lucky hits."

"They already have, sir."

"Where?"

"Section 282D."

O'Conner sat down heavily. "That's . . ."

"Yes, sir. Colonel Corban's position."

"Any survivors?"

"There must be, sir. The Zombi infantry moved in to mop up, and there's a fight going on."

"We'll have to get some help to them."

"Colonel Leblanc is working on it, sir."

"All right. I want to put through an immediate promotion to major general for Colonel Corban—posthumously if need be. See that it's taken care of."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Dormeyer to get operating with the ground to space stuff, and make it go as far as possible. We'll have to make some quick changes in our defensive plans. Each position will need a deep shelter to protect the men from space artillery, with communication tunnels so they can get out quickly to defend against ground attack. Telepathy gives the Zombis perfect communication, and they've probably worked out a fast way to adjust their fire. It's the beginning of the end, I suppose, but we're going to make it a long and bloody end."

## CHAPTER 10

QUALO BASE lay drenched in the searing sunlight of midday. The vast landing field was deserted. The fleet was in space, screening the base and maneuvering to contain the vicious thrust of the enemy. At the far end of the field, near the repair sheds, lay three battered ships that had miraculously limped back to base and landed. The harvest of war.

Commander Walter Forge descended wearily from his crawler, and limped towards the officers' mess. He had just completed a jarring inspection of the batteries covering the field, finding their attendants all awake and reasonably attentive. He hated bouncing over the dusty terrain in a bucking crawler. He would almost have preferred to walk—but woe to

the officer caught making that circuit on foot, wasting time when there was a war to be fought.

The mess was sparsely populated. Most of the officers were eating at their desks. Forge had no desk, so he eased himself into a chair beside Captain Pinky Durren, the base ordinance officer, and poured himself a cup of coffee in good conscience.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Durren said. "Another week, and we'll be on substitutes."

"Are things that bad?" Forge asked. "I thought the supply fleet was getting through all right."

"Sure. It's getting through. But some bright boy back yonder figured it out that we wouldn't be killing many of the enemy with coffee, and redlined the requisition. Ammunition, fuel, spare parts, sure. Coffee, no. Inside of a month we'll be on emergency rations, even if there's no emergency. They're compact and easy to ship."

"And inside of two months," Forge said, "we'll be toasting Qualo hoppers for breakfast, if we're still around to do any eating."

Durren shuddered.

The door at the end of the room opened. Admiral Winslow looked in, nodded, and strode quickly across to his private table. Durren leaned close to Forge, and whispered, "What's eating the old man? He's been jumpier than a hopper, and he never used to eat alone like that.

He ought to be pleased with himself—being boosted all the way to admiral and put in charge of this dump."

"It's his sister," Forge whispered back. "She was on Zernik."

"Huh? Didn't know he had one."

"Sylvia Winslow. The apple of the old man's eye. She visited Qualo a while back. Left just before you were assigned here. She was a wonderful girl—beautiful, too. She could have had her pick of any of the single men on base, and most any of the married men."

"Beautiful, but the cold, distant type, eh?"

Forge shook his head. "I wouldn't say that. It was a funny deal all around. The old man sent her some pictures of this fascinating life we lead in the navy. Naturally a lot of the base personnel turned up in the pictures, and she fell in love with one guy. Fell in love with his picture. An ensign named Paul Corban."

"Never heard of him."

"No. That was the tragic part of it. She fell in love with his picture, and nothing would do but she had to come here and meet him. So finally the Old Man had her sent over. But Corban was a flitter pilot, and he left on a routine mission just before she arrived. We never heard from him again. One message was picked up, but it was pretty badly jumbled, and communications couldn't make any-

thing of it. Well, we lost a pile of 11C's about that time, and we're pretty sure now that the Zombis were picking them off. That's no comfort to Corban, of course, and it left the girl pretty well broken up. A couple of thousand guys would have jumped at the chance of making her forget him, but she wouldn't have any second choice. She moped around here for awhile, and then she went back to Zernik. She was there when the Zombis hit. God only knows where she is now."

"I see," Durren said. "No wonder the Old Man is shook up."

A moment later the alert sounded, its piercing shrieks rattling the dishes on the table. Forge overturned a chair in his dash for the door. He leaped into his crawler, overtook the admiral and Durren, and stopped while they scrambled in. At headquarters building the three of them rushed to the operations room. A crowd of officers was watching anxiously while a young ensign plotted the progress of a single ship.

"Oh," the admiral said. "Is that all?"

"Broke through the screen, sir. Trouble is, we haven't got anything to send up after it."

"We'll give him a warm welcome if he comes close." Admiral Winslow turned away indifferently.

Forge looked at Durren. "I don't like it. We're sitting ducks here."

"It wasn't the Old Man's

idea," Durren said. "He just commands the base, not the fleet. He wanted them to leave him something, but they said everything was needed elsewhere." Durren looked reproachfully out of the window and across the park-like expanse of green to the enormous building that housed fleet headquarters. "It'd be a very funny joke if they were to lose their headquarters. That is, it would if they could lose it without ours going, too."

"Not much danger—from one ship. Still, you never know. These Zombis have all the advantage of surprise. They haven't really been tested, yet, and we don't know what the devil they've got."

"They got a pretty good test on Willar," Durren said. "General O'Conner practically paved that planet with the bodies of Zombis. He'd be there yet, if Rucker's squadron hadn't gotten maneuvered out of position. The army didn't have anything to fight spaceships with. But—we live and learn. Or some of us live. Wonder if they got anyone off Willar."

"Probably very few, if any. Trouble is, the Zombis are learning, too. What worked on Willar might not work anywhere else. What have we got here? Destroyer-sized ship, coming like the devil. Do we have any missiles up?"

"Already launched," the ensign said promptly.

"Nothing to do but sit it out, then."

They waited. The ensign sifted through reports; continued to plot, and became less cheerful. "Collision course," he announced.

"Looks like it," Forge said. "Do you suppose they have something that would melt this planet? It's theoretically possible, I've heard. Turn it into a sun. Maybe the Zombis don't want any more Willars. One ship, and—blooey. Very inexpensive."

The ensign's face assumed a slightly strained expression. "It's—still coming," he announced.

"Nonsense!" a voice behind them snapped. Admiral Winslow stood staring moodily at the chart. "Nonsense," he said again. "That's just a recon mission."

"Should we put a barrage up, sir?" Forge said. "At the rate he's coming, he'll either crash untouched, or loop past us, if we wait until he's in range."

Winslow nodded gravely. "Do so."

Forge picked up a telephone. A moment later the whumps of smaller rockets sounded above the hum of the communications center.

"He's changing course," the ensign said hopefully.

The officers watched, puzzled, and the ensign continued his plotting. Minutes later the tension had passed. The enemy ship had rushed at the planet, circled in a tight, looping orbit which broke atmosphere on the far side, and zoomed away towards

the Dropoff. The fleet was moving to intercept.

Admiral Winslow shrugged. "Recon mission," he said. "We can now assume that we're well photographed."

The ensign held up a message. "That wasn't all, sir. When he broke atmosphere—he dropped something."

Winslow snatched at it. "Interesting," he said, and reached for a telephone. He talked briefly, and hung up, looking thoughtful. "Some kind of a landing capsule was launched," he said. He moved over to the wall map. "This general area."

"There's certainly nothing there for them to damage," Forge said. He laughed hollowly. The officers looked nervously at Winslow.

"Sir?" Durren said.

"Yes?"

"These Zombis are telepaths."

"I know. I wasn't aware that it was a secret."

"I don't have any idea what their range is," Durren went on apologetically. "I suppose nobody does. But we just can't have a telepathic enemy agent on this planet—not with a base as important as this one. The Zombis will know more about what we're doing than we do ourselves."

"Why did they drop him way out in the wilderness?" Forge asked. "It'll take him weeks to get over where he can observe anything."

"Not weeks," Admiral Winslow said. "He will simply pick out a suitable hiding place, and

teleport himself over here when he wants to observe. The Zombis have a capable intelligence service. Obviously. They have plenty of prisoners, and they've been able to interrogate them. They knew this planet, and they knew their agent would be most vulnerable during and immediately after his landing, so they landed him where he'd be certain to get down and get organized without any interference. Forge, Lieutenant Brown already has some atmosphere planes on the way there. They might be able to pick out the landing site. I want you to round up every man that can be spared from anywhere, and get that Zombi—or Zombis. There may be more than one. You're in complete charge."

Forge sprang to his feet. "Yes, sir."

"And Forge—" Winslow smiled. "—special orders from Supreme Headquarters. Intelligence wants a prisoner to interrogate, and so far no Zombi has been taken alive. You will make every effort to take him, or them, alive."

"May I use the dogs, sir?"

"Alive," Winslow said stiffly. "The small chunks of meat the dogs might leave would be of slight use to Intelligence. Any other questions?"

"Yes, sir. How do you go about catching a teleport?"

"For that matter," Durren broke in, "how the devil would the dogs track down a teleport?"

Admiral Winslow shrugged.

He was still smiling when he left the room. Forge ordered a plane made ready for him, and hurried away.

Miraculously, Brown's planes had spotted the landing capsule by the time Forge arrived on the scene. He stepped out of his plane into the dismal night that covered the Qualo wilderness with smothering blackness. The capsule had come to rest on one of the multitude of stubby knolls that thrust their rocky outlines above the lush vegetation of the lower ground. They were honeycombed with caves and hollows. The low ground was spongy, now, and would be a roaring swamp when the rainy season arrived, which, Forge thought thankfully, would not be for several months.

Forge got an artificial moon hung, and organized the search. As the troops arrived he pushed them out in a widening circle and watched them disappear down into the fog-streaked jungle.

Lieutenant Brown was examining the capsule. "If it's any help," he said, "there's only one. This thing wouldn't hold more than one, unless the Zombis have midgets."

"One will be plenty," Forge said, kicking at the weathered rock. "Isn't this a hell of a place? He could hide right under our feet, here, with a fifty-fifty chance of being overlooked."

A hot sun came up to burn

away the fog. More men were flown in to fill in the gaps as the circle of searchers widened. Forge paced back and forth receiving a long series of negative reports as the morning waned. Admiral Winslow arrived at noon, it then being night over at Qualo Base. The two of them were flown out to the perimeter of the slowly expanding circle. They stood on another rocky knoll with the ensign who was in charge of the men floundering about in the jungle below them.

"It's like this, sir," the ensign said. "It takes a hundred men a good hour just to search one of these rock piles; and then it's a superficial search. Some of these holes go down a long way, and sometimes they turn corners, which isn't easy to spot without going in and looking. And down there in the jungle it would be possible to walk right past a person without seeing him."

The admiral grunted.

"As I see it," Forge said, "the only hope is extensive air patrols between this place and base. If we're real lucky, a pilot might spot this Zombi and get a shot at him before he makes himself disappear. This kind of search is useless. Even a normal person could elude us indefinitely in this terrain."

The admiral said nothing. He lowered his binoculars, and walked down the slope to a thorn bush on the edge of the jungle. There he leaned over to

finger a small fragment of dark green cloth.

"This isn't from one of our uniforms," he said.

They stared at the cloth, the ensign profanely promising a week of extra duty for the squad that walked past without seeing it.

"Never mind," Admiral Winslow said. "I happened to put the binoculars right on it, and the light was right."

Forge called to his pilot. "How far are we from the place the capsule came down?"

"About ten miles," the pilot said.

"I suppose this represents his first jump, then. Or maybe he's made several jumps, from hill to hill, and when he got here he decided to pick out a safe place down in the jungle."

"Then if he's still there . . ." the ensign began.

"Oh, he won't be there now. But he'll have some safe places—memorized, I guess you'd say, and as we get close to him he'll jump around from place to place. I understand that's the way Zombis operate."

"Air patrols, you say," Admiral Winslow mused. "Then you're convinced that this search is futile?"

"It is the way we're doing it now. Either he's a hundred miles ahead of us, or else he's ducked back somewhere inside the circle where we've already searched."

"Very well. Call in the men, and set up the air patrols. And then I want you to start over

again from the landing area, and use dogs."

"Dogs, sir?" Forge said, startled. "The dogs won't have any better luck than we've had."

"Perhaps not. But we may be able to learn something about this Zombi. If we can pick up his trail in a few places, we'll at least know how far he jumps. Have the dogs sent out. All of them."

"Yes, sir," Forge said, and went to the plane to get off the message.

A transport lowered itself down with the dogs—three dozen of them, caged and muzzled. Actually they were cat-like creatures, hideous, voracious, sabretoothed, long-clawed brutes, and if a dog was capable of affection it was only for its own attendant, who trained it, and kept its motley hide brushed, and brought it tidbits. And the attendant, Forge noted, carried a pistol when he worked his dog.

Captain Durren had come along to see the dogs work, and he stood with Forge and watched the attendants getting them ready. "I pity anyone they get ahold of," Durren said. "Even a Zombi."

"Yeah," Forge said. He remembered an incident when a drunken officer had blundered into a compound the dogs were guarding. The attendants had been there almost immediately, but the officer had been collected in a basket. "Wonder why the Old Man changed his mind."

"Oh—you mean about taking the Zombi alive. That's just a joke, you know. Intelligence keeps asking for one, but everyone knows they couldn't keep one if they got it. The Old Man knew you didn't stand a chance of laying eyes on that Zombi. Otherwise, he wouldn't have pulled that gag."

"Now he tells me," Forge groaned, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"This is a serious situation, you know," Durren said. "The Old Man spent most of yesterday with Intelligence, trying to figure out what to do about this Zombi, and what might happen if we can't catch him. And the consensus is we'd better eliminate him in a hurry. The Old Man will try dogs, or anything else, and your best lead to a fast promotion would be to bring him in some fresh Zombi meat."

"I hope my next promotion doesn't depend on that. A Zombi could drive these dogs nuts."

The non-com in charge of the dogs approached and saluted. "We're ready to start, sir."

Forge looked at the dogs, straining on their leashes, and shuddered. "Wouldn't it be better to leave the muzzles on?"

"They won't follow a trail if they're muzzled. They won't follow on a leash, either."

Admiral Winslow came forward. "I'll take charge of this, Forge. We'll start at the capsule with one team."

"Yes, sir," the non-com said. They stood well back, and



watched the dogs sniff around the capsule. Then the attendants removed the leashes, and the dogs took off with a frightful caterwauling and raced, eyes blazing and fangs dripping saliva, down the slope and into the jungle.

"What d'ya know," Forge breathed. "He walked away from it!"

Durren shrugged. Admiral Winslow was already hurrying after the dogs, and they followed him.

The pace slowed almost immediately. The dogs milled around with much sniffing and slurping, and slowly edged deeper into the jungle. "Have they lost him?" Forge asked.

"Oh, no," the non-com said. "Trail is a bit stale, and there are probably lots of strange odors to confuse them. This ground cover has a lot of bounce, hasn't it? You could drive a crawler in here without leaving any tracks."

For an hour they pushed on slowly, and finally they emerged at the base of another rocky mound. The dogs seemed confused, sniffing their way off in several directions, and then turning back.

"Is this where he made his jump?" Durren asked.

"No," the non-com said. "There's more than one trail. It branches off."

They looked at each other dumbly. "It can't," Admiral Winslow announced. "There must have been more than one,

and they separated here. They may be super-humans, but I doubt that they reproduce by fission."

"I'll call up the reserve teams," the non-com said.

A plane dropped down with the other dogs. It took the non-com some time to get things organized, but finally he asked, "Shall I use one team on each trail? It branches off in three directions."

"Three!" Forge muttered. "In that capsule?"

Admiral Winslow signaled the non-com to proceed. Forge and Durren remained with the admiral's group, and followed a trail which circled the base of the knoll. At one point the dogs hovered suspiciously about the mouth of a cave, and one of them sniffed its way inside, came out again. The dogs shuffled on, and minutes later ran headlong into the dogs of another team. There was much growling and snapping, and the attendants waded boldly into the melee and got the animals leashed.

"That explains everything," Admiral Winslow said. "He circled the knoll, hid in a cave for awhile, and then went on around and back into the jungle. Where he crossed his trail, there were three trails for the dogs to follow. Hold these dogs back, and we'll catch up with the others."

Winslow moved off at a fast trot, and Forge and Durren had to hurry to keep up with him. "It doesn't *quite* explain every-

thing," Forge muttered. "It doesn't explain why he's walking."

"He knew we'd try to trail him," Durren said, "so he left us something to follow. Quite a refined sense of humor, eh? If he'd gotten out of that capsule and taken a fifty-mile jump, we'd have had to give up, and look at the amount of work all these men might have accomplished today. He's sabotaging our war effort by doing a little walking."

"But if the dogs happen to get close to him, he'll take the fifty-mile jump."

"Naturally," Durren said. "I haven't got teleportation, but if I heard those dogs after me I think I could manage a jump almost that long."

They caught up with the dogs, and beat their way forward through the jungle. The afternoon waned and dusk came early among the brittle, thick-leaved trees. Insects swarmed over them, and tormented the dogs, who stopped frequently to snap and scratch. But they kept pushing forward.

"What were you muttering about?" Durren said to Forge.

"I was wondering if something could happen to one of these Zombis that would keep him from teleporting. Like spraining an ankle might keep one of us from walking."

"Spraining a mental ankle? I haven't the vaguest idea. But I think we'll know before long."

"What makes you think so?"

"Haven't you noticed? We're

going faster. Trail's getting warmer. We're catching up with him."

They were moving faster, and the dogs had begun to ignore the insects. They jostled each other, struggling to get to the head of the pack, and their howls changed to a tense, deep-throated roar that echoed dismally through the jungle. Suddenly the sounds changed again, to a rapacious yelping, and they broke into a run.

The men struggled forward, the attendants vainly trying to keep up with the dogs. Admiral Winslow stumbled along, his chest heaving, his eyes alight with excitement. "We'll scare him, anyway," he chanted. "We'll give him a good scare. He'll never sleep well again on this planet."

The dogs were out of sight. They had spread out, leaving a broad trail of torn branches and bent trees. They were crashing forward, their yelps a full-throated, terrifying chorus. Suddenly a scream pierced through the jungle, and another, and another, and then there was no sound but the triumphant, tearing growls of the dogs.

"They got him!" Admiral Winslow shouted.

Weariness dropped away from them, and they broke into a run.

The attendants arrived first. They hauled off the dogs, snapped on their leashes, and pulled them back out of sight of their prey. Winslow panted up to the

pathetic, torn and bloody heap of flesh, and stood over it triumphantly for a moment.

But only for a moment. Suddenly he staggered backwards. He screamed. His fists flailed frantically at the air, at his chest, his face, and he toppled forward and lay, kicking and clawing, and his panting, choking voice sobbed, "No, no, no . . ."

Forge and Durren rushed up, stared at Winslow, and then at the mound of mutilated flesh. Limbs were torn free from the body. The throat was gone, devoured, but the face was miraculously untouched. It was the fresh, unspoiled face of a young woman, a lovely young woman, with a lock of hair tumbled over her forehead, and dimpled cheeks, and a small, turned-up nose. But even in death her eyes were wide-staring and terrified.

"Good Lord!" Forge breathed. "It's his sister!"

"Sylvia Winslow?" Durren said.

"Yes. Probably didn't know where she was, or who—or what—was chasing her. It's a wonder she didn't die of fright."

"It would have been better if she had."

Forge stood with head bowed, his face buried in his hands. Durren stumbled away, and Forge heard him off in the jungle, being sick. The other men had drawn back, all except a medic, who had bent over the admiral and was fumbling un-

certainly in his kit. The only other sounds were the rustling leaves, and Winslow's sobs, and, somewhere nearby, a contented crunching as the attendants fed the dogs.

"The devils!" Forge whispered. "The filthy devils!"

Durren returned, and stood with Forge, looking at the admiral's shaking body. "Just a little joke they thought up for us," he said softly. "They found out who she was, and they knew her brother was a high-ranking officer here, so they made a generous gesture, and returned her to him. Only they did it in such a way that we'd think she was one of them. They even gave her one of their uniforms." He looked fiercely at Forge. "You see what they're saying, don't you? They're saying, 'you poor, dumb animals. This could never happen among humans. You couldn't do this to us. We'd know as soon as the girl landed, or even before she landed, who she was and where she was. She'd tell us telepathically, and we'd send someone out after her, and that would be that. Only stupid animals such as you will track down and murder one of your own people. We were kind enough to bring her back. It isn't our fault if you are less than human.'"

Admiral Winslow got slowly to his feet, and pushed aside the medic. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking upward. His tear-streaked face gleamed white against the settling darkness, and on his face was such a look

of intense, killing hatred that Forge shuddered and turned away.

"All right," Winslow said hoarsely. "Let's get on with it."

## CHAPTER 11

LIGHT drifted dimly through a yawning opening, and traced a jagged outline on the floor of the rubble-strewn basement. Sharp eyes waited in the gloom; alert young muscles were tensed for action.

A rat crept into the open, hesitated, edged forward. The eyes took aim. The muscles acted, and a slingshot twanged. The rat toppled, and lay twitching.

A boy leaped forward and seized it. He untied a bag from his belt, and thrust in the rat. "There," he said, chortling gleefully as he carefully knotted the bag. "There. Four of 'em. I guess we'll eat tonight!"

A sound reached his ears, an almost imperceptible fleck of sound, but he froze where he stood, looked quickly at the opening, and then began to edge back into the shadows. Silently his lips formed a word. "Zombi!"

His hand went to his belt, jerked out a weapon. He called it a knife, but actually it was a length of stiff wire set in a crude wooden handle. The end had been patiently worked into a tapering, deadly point. He slipped behind a splintered cabinet, and waited.

A figure appeared in the opening, looked the room over

cautiously, and stepped in. The Zombi sensed danger. He advanced only a couple of steps and stood pivoting slowly, his weapon held ready to fire. The boy, shrunk into his hiding place, watched him hatefully.

Suddenly the boy moved. His bare feet felt their way surely and silently across the cluttered floor. His last steps were a furious charge, the knife arched and plunged, and buried itself to the handle in the green-smocked back.

As the Zombi fell he wrenched the knife free. One leap carried him to the opening, and another took him out into the gray light of evening, running furiously, running for his life.

There would be other Zombis there, immediately. It always happened that way. He had never heard a Zombi utter a sound, but his father had told him the Zombis could think thoughts at each other a long way off, and understand them, and he believed it. Whenever he stabbed one of them he had a mob of them after him almost before he could get his legs working.

He charged headlong across a crumbling bit of pavement and dove into the ruins of a smashed building. Fire snapped and crackled over his head as he dove, and drilled a neat hole in the exposed concrete foundation on the far side. He rolled to the bottom, regained his feet, and ran. Burrowing into some rubble, he slipped through the nar-

row, concealed entrance of a tunnel. He scooted through it on hands and knees, came up in an adjoining building, and risked a sprint across some weed-cluttered open ground. Behind him he could hear shallow popping noises, followed by hisses hardly audible.

"Gas pellets," he muttered.

He was safe, now—almost. A basement, another tunnel, and he emerged under a building that was so flattened that even the rats avoided it. He had cleared out a hideaway for himself, and from a metal cabinet that was wedged under the ruins at a crazy angle he took a large sheet of paper.

It was a map, carefully drawn, and covered with minute notes. He placed an X at the spot where he had stabbed the Zombi, and circled it. Beside the basement opposite, he wrote, "Gas," and noted the date. He sighed. "It'll be weeks before I'll get any more rats there."

He replaced the map, and turned his attention to his knife. With a sharp stone he sawed a notch in the handle. "Twelve," he said, patting it affectionately. If he could get ahold of a gun, he'd really mow them down. But he couldn't. It was too risky. That was how Willie Ulstead had gotten it. He'd tried to grab a Zombi's gun, after he'd stabbed him, but the Zombi wouldn't let go, and the others had been there before Willie could get away. No, the only way to do it was to stab and run. But

it sure would be fun with a gun . . .

There was no light in the damp, crumbling sub-cellar where his parents lived. He slipped in out of the night, into a heavier darkness, and whistled softly as he approached, so as not to frighten them. "Light up, Ma," he said.

When she had a small blaze going he gave her the bag of rats, and went over to sit by his father. "Something for you, Dad," he said, and from under his ragged coat he took a bottle.

His father kept blank, unseeing eyes on the opposite wall. Beneath a filth-clotted beard his face was pasty-white. His trembling fingers closed on the bottle. It slipped from his grasp, and the boy caught it and placed it on his lap.

"Look, Dad. Something special."

His father raised the bottle, and squinted. "Whiskey!" he said, in an awed whisper. "Whiskey! Where . . ."

"Dug it out," the boy said. "Thought you'd like it."

"We'll save it for special occasions," the father muttered. "Make it last. Ought to last a long time. We don't have many occasions. But I guess this is one, 'cause you found it. Mother?"

"No," she said. "You drink it."

"It's no special occasion, drinking alone." He broke the seal, opened the bottle, and

sniffed. Impulsively he tipped it up, drank deeply, and smacked his lips. "Mother?"

"Just a taste."

He poured a little into a shallow plate, and watched her drink. Then he looked at the boy hesitantly. "Jerry?"

The boy took the bottle, took a sip, and grimaced. He returned the bottle to his father, who carefully replaced the cap.

"Well," he said, rubbing his hands. "Well." He beamed. "How many rats did you get, Jerry?"

"Four," the boy said. "They're fat ones, too. I guess there's still lots of people buried in the ruins for 'em to eat."

"Jerry!" his mother moaned.

"Got another Zombi, too," the boy said casually.

His mother turned slowly, her face pale. "Oh, Jerry. Do be careful. What would your father and I do if something happened to you?"

"Die a little sooner," the father mumbled. "Die a little sooner. Does it matter?"

The boy picked up a well-thumbed book, and moved into the feeble light of the fire to read. The rats sizzled and sputtered, and whenever he turned a page he looked up to sniff hungrily.

He ignored the glances his mother and father sent his way. It made him uneasy, the way they looked at him, as if he were a stranger to them. And it made him uneasy the way they seemed strangers to him. His mother's

buxom figure had dissolved into an appalling, sickly thinness. Her dark hair had suddenly become silvery white. His father's hair had vanished entirely as his beard grew, and he seldom stirred from his pile of rags. From a hearty, fearless man he had become one who cringed at an unexpected noise and babbled pathetically in his sleep.

"Jerry?"

"Yes, Ma."

"I wish you'd stay away from the Zombis."

"They got it coming," the boy said stoutly. "They got Paul and Bill, didn't they? And Sue? I'm gonna get as many as I can, and go right on killing 'em until I die."

"I wish you'd speak to him, John."

"No." The father shook his head. The drink of whiskey had buoyed up his spirits, and he sat with the bottle in his hand, reading the label over and over and nodding his head jerkily. "No. There's nothing to live for. He might as well go down fighting as to hide like a rat until he's hunted down. If I could get out of this hole I'd account for a few of 'em myself."

The mother lifted her hands helplessly, and turned her attention to the rats.

"You could have gotten away if it wasn't for me," the father said softly. "Both of you. You shouldn't have stayed. You could have gotten away, and Jerry could have grown up, and

I bet he'd of given the Zombis a good account of himself. The human race needs boys like him, to learn to fly the ships and handle the guns. But if all he can do is stab a few in the back, why, I say let him stab."

"I guess we'd better eat," the mother said nervously.

They turned their ravenous attention to the rats.

With the sharp edge of his hunger blunted somewhat, Jerry felt like talking. "Lots of moons up tonight, Dad," he said.

"That so?"

"Dad, why don't the soldiers ever come over and fight the Zombis?"

"They can't, son. The Zombis don't stay put long enough to be fought, even if the soldiers could get past the barrier."

"Then why don't the Zombis go over and fight the soldiers instead?"

"They're afraid. Whenever they try it, they get licked."

Jerry scratched his head thoughtfully. "Then—how can anybody ever win the war if nobody fights?"

"They're fighting all the time, I guess, but not big battles. Except maybe the ships out in space, but it's been so long since we've heard anything . . . I really don't know. It's an odd kind of war, and these Zombis are an odd kind of people."

"Savages!" the mother sobbed.

"I suppose so," the father said wearily. "I suppose—I suppose they just mean to starve us out, since they can't whip us. Corner

us and starve us out. Everywhere."

The fire was dying down. Jerry looked at it sadly. It would have been nice to build up a big fire, and have it warm all night. There was plenty of stuff to burn, but fires could be seen, and fires made smoke that could be seen and smelled, and it just wasn't safe.

"I think . . ." he began, and stopped.

Noises sounded above them—a rain of hollow, popping sounds and sinister hisses. Jerry was on his feet in a bound. "Gas pellets! Quick! This tunnel." He pawed stones and dirt away from the opening. "You first, Ma. Hurry, Dad."

"No!" John Corban waved them away. "Go on, both of you. I've been a burden to you long enough."

Jerry leaped to the corner and seized his father's arm. "Not much time," he panted, pulling frantically. His father fought back, pushed him away. His mother joined him, and they dragged the struggling man across the floor to the opening.

"There. Inside—quick!"

"I'm not going," John Corban said firmly.

"Very well." His wife brushed a lock of white hair back from her face, and smiled. "If you stay, I stay with you."

He glared at her furiously for an instant, but only an instant. Then he turned, and hauled himself into the tunnel, pulling him-



self forward with his arms, and dragging his useless stumps of legs after him. His wife followed, trying to help him along, and Jerry entered last and spent a long time filling up the opening, packing it with a solid wall of dirt to keep the deadly gas from cutting them down before they got clear of the tunnel.

Their progress was slow. Air was bad in the tunnel, and the going was so cramped and uncomfortable that Jerry, who had spent hours of exhausting work in digging it, wished he had made it larger.

Suddenly John Corban stopped. His wife struggled briefly and then halted her frantic shoving, and from the rear Jerry hissed, "Keep going, Dad."

His father's muffled voice drifted back to him. "Seems to be a cave-in."

Jerry was silent for a moment. "You'll have to dig through it," he said finally. "Shove the dirt back to Ma, and she'll shove it back to me."

They worked, panting and perspiring in the choking darkness. "Doesn't seem to be—any end to it," John Corban gasped.

"Keep at it, Dad," Jerry called bravely.

The air was rapidly getting worse. As Jerry shoved the dirt behind him it began to fill up the tunnel, leaving them struggling for breath in the short section marked off by the lengths of their three bodies.

The dirt stopped coming. "It's not worth it," John Corban said.

"We couldn't have lasted much longer anyway. Better let it happen here. At least the rats won't be eating us."

"Keep digging, Dad," Jerry pleaded.

"Can't. I'm getting dizzy."

"Make him dig, Ma!"

His mother did not answer. Jerry grabbed her leg and shook it. "Dad, Ma's passed out!"

He heard the desperate lunge his father made, and then—"Got my hand through."

"Push the dirt—the other way," Jerry gasped.

Suddenly they could breathe freely. Jerry massaged his mother's legs, and she revived and lay motionless, sobbing. His father began to haul himself along, and Jerry urged his mother forward. The tunnel stretched on unendingly. The already-slow pace lagged until it seemed to Jerry that they moved only by fitful jerks. It was no trial to him, because most of his time had been given over to digging tunnels or crawling through them. But he feared for his parents, who had not left their cellar for weeks.

"Another cave-in," John Corban said.

Jerry's mother spoke the first word she had uttered since entering the tunnel, a desperate, aching cry. "No!"

"Maybe it's the end," Jerry said. "I mean, the end of the tunnel. It won't be stopped up very far. But Dad—if they've gassed the cellar, we'll be done for."

"Might as well find out," his father said. "We'll be done for if we stay here much longer."

"Be quiet about it, Dad."

A few minutes later they were in the cellar, delighting in the coolness of the damp, musty air. They rested quietly without speaking. Zombis might still be around, and this cellar was not a good hiding place. Stars glimmered dimly through a multitude of openings, but fortunately there was no moonlight except the distant haze in the sky from the artificial moons set up by the soldiers.

Jerry's mind was working furiously. They could not stay here. They would have to find a new place to live, and at once. He had several suitable places picked out—he would, in fact, have moved his parents long before if his father had not stubbornly rejected the idea. And now both of them were tired out from the trip through the tunnel, and they still had a hard, dangerous trek ahead of them if they were to reach safety before dawn.

"I'd better check for Zombis," he said.

Suddenly his father began to weep. The first outburst was a wild, uncontrolled sobbing, and Jerry sprang to his feet in horror, expecting any moment to see the silhouette of a Zombi against the night sky. Then he managed to muffle his sobs, but he wept on, and on, until Jerry's mother crawled over and stroked

his head and moaned tirelessly, "John, John, John." And still he did not stop.

Jerry bent over, found his hand, and shook it awkwardly. "Dad? What's the matter, Dad?"

"The whiskey," John Corban sobbed. "I left the whiskey."

## CHAPTER 12

ON THE day that Lieutenant Willis Perrin reported for duty aboard the battleship *Castor*, the admiral personally escorted him to the officers' mess, rapped for attention, and said pompously, "I have the honor to present to you our new staff officer, Lieutenant Willis Perrin. He was at Ferrano."

A moment of stunned silence followed, and then those at the rear stood up to better see this phenomenon, someone clapped noisily, and the room erupted into cheers and applause that blew out two circuits on the ship's intercom system.

The *Castor* immediately accorded Perrin a status normally reserved for visiting politicians, and a veneration seldom given anyone below the rank of deity. Perrin had, just prior to his assignment, made the astounding leap from unranked spaceman to the commissioned rank of lieutenant, and no one held it against him. He arrived accompanied by glowing recommendations from lofty sources, and no one went out of his way to prove them wrong. When the new lieutenant spoke, which was seldom,

all ranks from the most lowly spaceman to the admiral listened attentively and ventured no contradiction.

For Lieutenant Willis Perrin had been at Ferrano.

Ferrano! In its long annals of heroic achievement the Federation Space Navy had never had a day that compared with Ferrano. In a few blazing hours it annihilated a Zombi fleet and so severely decimated a second fleet speeding to the rescue that it turned and fled, hopelessly routed.

The Zombis' brutal invasion had been turned back. Their ships were chased beyond the Dropoff into uncharted space. Their land forces were left isolated and unsupported on the multitude of planets the Zombis had already devoured, to be mopped up at leisure as soon as the Federation Army perfected a technique of attack.

And as soon as the border area was secured, the Federation Fleet would range far into uncharted space in search of the Zombis' home worlds.

That was Ferrano—the most decisive battle in human history, and certainly the most important. It was the turning point of the war.

"In my opinion," Lieutenant Perrin said crisply, "you are misinterpreting the significance of Ferrano."

The remark was received in respectful silence. The place was the ship's communications cen-

ter, and the various duty officers and technicians were in a relaxed and talkative mood. The squadron to which the *Castor* was attached was cruising slowly along the Dropoff, unmolested. With little else to occupy their attention, the communications men were engaged in a spirited argument on how best to end the war—fast.

Lieutenant Perrin had not come to the room to engage in idle conversation. The ship's instruments had detected a lone Zombi ship, far out of range in uncharted territory, cruising parallel with the squadron. It was obviously a recon ship, keeping a watchful eye on the squadron's movements, but Lieutenant Perrin found its presence disturbing. He was technically off duty, but he had been in the communications center for some hours, warily looking over reports on the Zombi ship's movements.

He stood at an observation port, peering into the blackness of space, and spoke over his shoulder. He was old, for a junior officer, and he had been in space, and in the navy, for a long time, and the unthinking frivolity of the conversation in the room disgusted him.

"You are quite right," he said, "in considering Ferrano a turning point, but it is not *the* turning point. It may not even be a turning point in our favor."

There was a yelp of protest from a very young officer, who lapsed into flustered silence

when Perrin flashed a forboding scowl in his direction. "It is not a turning point in the course of the war," Perrin went on. "It is a turning point in the nature of the war. There is a difference."

"I don't quite understand," a lieutenant commander said politely.

"It is a turning point in the space war just as Willar was a turning point in the land war. The Zombis lost the best part of three armies on Willar, as near as we are able to figure out. Their losses could easily have been three times that severe. Never since then have they attacked Federation land forces in a defensive position. But their invasion continued, and they continued to successfully occupy planets. They simply changed their tactics.

"Ferrano is a similar turning point. I think we can be safe in the assumption that never again will a Zombi fleet attack one of our fleets. Our ships out-manuever theirs, our weapons out-range theirs, and our battle tactics are immeasurably superior. Our men are also superior fighting men—for that kind of battle. Unless the Zombis are complete idiots, which I doubt, they will never again engage us in that kind of battle. Ferrano will simply mark a turning point in the Zombis' tactics."

The lieutenant commander was doubtful, but respectful. "In what way?"

"Who knows how a Zombi

thinks? We have yet to take a single prisoner, and if we did we probably couldn't interrogate him. How could we interrogate a man who communicates telepathically? But if I were a Zombi . . ."

Perrin's voice trailed away. He turned again to the observation port. Somewhere off in the darkness, too far away to be detected by other than the most sensitive instruments, was the Zombi ship. What would he do if he were a Zombi?

He started. A grayish shadow slid gracefully out of the void, approached the *Castor*, and disappeared from his angle of vision. Perrin leaped into action. His hand smashed at the general alarm. He sent the duty officer sprawling, and snapped out orders with a quiet urgency. For a terrible minute or two nothing happened, except that the others in the room exchanged nervous whispers and two or three of them tapped their heads significantly.

Then the admiral came on the intercom, requesting more information, and the first report came in from the emergency squad that Perrin's orders had sent prowling around the ship's outer shell.

"I saw him—or it," a voice announced. "When I went for him, he just disappeared."

"Scared him off, eh?" the admiral broke in. "Nice going, Perrin. That was quick thinking."

"Admiral," Perrin said, "I

recommend that we abandon ship."

"You recommend *what?*" he bellowed.

"That we abandon ship."

The admiral momentarily forgot that Perrin had been at Ferrano. His reply was ungentelemanly, unprintable, and full of unsupportable allusions to Perrin's ancestry. He was developing at length the lieutenant's relationship with the cowardly snash lizzards of Liroy's jungle, when an explosion tore the *Cas-tor* in half.

The communications room emptied in a frantic rush for life suits, but Perrin remained at his post, calmly switched to emergency power, and proceeded to describe the fate of the *Cas-tor* to a horrified Fleet Headquarters.

"A Zombi in a powered suit teleported himself to the immediate vicinity of the ship, used his power unit for a fast approach, planted his explosives, and disappeared — teleported himself away. A search party saw him vanish, but failed to find the explosives. Probably couldn't have removed them to a safe distance if they had. My signals are ignored by other ships of this squadron, and I have seen six flashes from this observation post in the last thirty seconds. The entire squadron may be affected. All survivors have abandoned ship. Lieutenant Willis Perrin reporting and requesting immediate assistance for survivors of the

squadron from all ships in the sector."

Perrin repeated his message five times before he closed down his station. He prowled through the sealed-off nose of the ship looking for a life suit, found none, and settled down with a book to wait until he ran out of air.

As his posthumus citation said, it was only due to his heroism that the fleet ever knew what happened in those fateful seconds near the Dropoff. The squadron was decimated. The Federation navy lost ninety-seven ships almost instantaneously, and there were no other ships in position to rescue the survivors. When the battle cruiser *Altair* arrived on the scene space was littered with pathetically drifting, suffocated bodies, and in the twisted hulk of the *Castor* Lieutenant Perrin was peacefully dead with a book on his lap.

### CHAPTER 13

"I SAY, COLONEL—"

"Yes, Mike?" The colonel turned a page, and laid the well-thumbed volume on the table, face down. He looked up inquiringly.

"How is it going to end?"

The colonel looked at the captain's serious, young-old face, and managed a smile. "I don't know, Mike."

"This inactivity isn't good for the men, sir."

"It isn't good for me, either. But there isn't much we can do

about it, is there? Unless we can come up with some kind of a reverse Corban Plan, that would work on the attack. Got any ideas?"

The captain looked away. "No, sir."

"Nor have I. So we're stuck here. We don't dare attack them, and they don't dare attack us. But the advantage is all with them, because while we're sitting smugly safe in these circles, they can move around and take over world after world and wreck the cities and murder the civilians and generally ignore us."

"You know how it's going to end," the captain said.

"I suppose I do. We can sit here until our food runs out, and then we can either launch some kind of foolish attack and get ourselves killed, or we can surrender, with the only other alternative being to starve. But I keep hoping that someone will think of something."

"Maybe someone will."

"It comes down to this," the colonel said. "The Zombis couldn't win any kind of battle in space without tremendous odds, and they couldn't win a ground battle, no matter what the odds, when they had to attack us. So they've made it a war of trickery and sabotage. For a long time there was just no stopping a Zombi saboteur. They blew up our ships in space, and wrecked ground and supply installations, and they got the fleet whittled

down to a point where it was almost crippled. They tell me they have the problem licked, now, but from the way the Zombis keep breaking through what's left of the fleet it looks as if it's too late."

"The problem won't stay licked, anyway," the captain said. "The Zombis keep dreaming up new techniques."

"You have to give them credit. They keep learning. They thought they were pretty hot stuff, and it took them awhile to realize that they didn't know much about military science. But when they stopped fighting our kind of war and concentrated on their own special talents, it left us helpless. Look at the way they took this planet. Smuggled in a few men, blew up all the utilities and any military installations of importance, terrorized the civilian population, chased the army into defensive positions, and forced the navy to abandon it. All that with not more than a battalion of troops, and without a single battle worthy of the name. Then they moved in and took over. They're doing the same thing on world after world while our navy keeps getting pushed back. Yes, I know how it's going to end."

The captain raised his hands helplessly. "There must be some way."

"That's what I keep telling myself. But lately I haven't been sounding very convincing. Oh, it's not going to end suddenly. The Zombis made a mistake,

there. They turned their invasion into a war of attrition, and they lost their heads and hit at us any way they could, which meant that the civilians suffered the most. You don't surrender to an invader who's been murdering women and children—not if you can help it. A lot of humans are going to fight until they die, and strike back at the Zombis any way they can, and it could go on for another generation. Maybe it will never stop entirely. I don't think the Zombis can exterminate the human race, even if they want to. There are too many of us, on too many worlds, and the Federation covered a lot of space. But our human civilization will be smashed, if it hasn't been already. That's how it will end."

"Then why do we sit here, sir? Why don't we go out and fight? Even if we're wiped out, we'll have contributed something."

"These are good troops, Mike, and we don't want to waste them. We have to have them ready just in case someone does think of something. It'd be a pity if a plan were worked out, and then there was no one to carry it out. There's nothing we can do but wait—as long as we can."

"I suppose so."

The captain did not look convinced. The colonel turned away wearily, and picked up his book.

After some moments the telephone rang. The colonel lifted it, listened, slowly hung up.

"Bad news?" the captain asked.

"Relay from Fleet Headquarters. The Zombis have broken through again."

"How far did they get this time?"

"Earth."

## CHAPTER 14

FOR weeks and months Paul Corban's life at the *Raxtinu* went on unchanged. He seldom saw Doctor Alir. He thought that he was avoiding her, but eventually it occurred to him that she must be avoiding him, as if the memory of the one magic and pathetic moment in his arms embarrassed her. His love for her did not change, but he made it a thing apart from him, and sealed it off as one might a fragile, untouchable flower.

Unintentionally she had betrayed him, as he had betrayed his people. He did not blame her, but neither did he want her beauty constantly tormenting him with memory of his unconscious treachery, for he was certain that only his love for her had made him trust her.

Miles Fletcher and Roger Froin, the two martyred humans, came no more, and Corban lacked the courage to seek them out. He knew there were others from the Federation among the inmates, though he had no idea who they were or where they lived, and whenever he found a patient giving him



more than a passing glance he imagined that it was a fellow human regarding him with burning hatred.

"Eventually," he told himself, "I shall go mad. And then—then perhaps it will be easier."

For some days he concentrated on losing his mind, and the fact of his sanity became a thing of torment.

More and more Corban kept to himself, avoiding even casual contact with his fellow inmates. For days at a time he did not leave his room. Books might have lessened his suffering, but there were no books, except the insipid volumes the Dornirians thought suitable for their insane. His meal tray appeared, and more often than not disappeared without his having touched it. He lost weight, and a numbing lethargy descended upon him. He would lay for hours on his invisible bed staring trance-like at the soft-toned dullness of the ceiling.

In the evening he would be jerked back to reality when the sweetly-cracked tones of the old man's voice came drifting to him through the dusk. He found the songs increasingly irritable. He closed his window tightly, and still the music reached him as a faintly throbbing thread of beauty touched with pathos. He paced his room angrily, muttered threats, and delivered vicious kicks at the softly unyielding substance of his bed. One evening when it seemed that he

could stand it no longer he stormed into the park, seized the old man's crude instrument, and broke it over his knee.

The old man was first astonished, and then grief-stricken. He gathered the splintered wreck to him tenderly, and sobbed, "Why did you do that?"

Corban turned stonily and marched away. He wondered, afterwards, if the old man would fashion himself another instrument and find a less hostile audience for his songs. Perhaps he did, but Corban never heard him sing again. Paradoxically, he came to miss his songs.

In the darkness he would stand by his window gazing up at the stars. He was not entirely certain of his orientation, but he felt that some of them must be Federation stars, the stars of his people, and he knew that the crashing thunder of war was enveloping them and ripping through their peaceful skies, and that he, Paul Corban, was responsible.

His brother Bill would be in it—Corban was certain of that. Bill was a soldier, and a good one, and not the kind to run from a fight, whether it was the childish neighborhood brawls he delighted in as a boy, or a war that spanned the galaxy. He'd be in it from the start, if he could manage it.

And his sister Sue—she should be married by now. He prayed that she was deliciously happy, and that her husband had carried her off to some dis-

tant place of safety—back to old Earth, or to the far fringes of the Federation where not even a ripple of violence would disturb her life.

At home there was little Jerry, and his parents. Jerry was no longer the baby he'd been when Corban last saw him. But surely Jerry and his parents were safe. The Dornirian monsters could not penetrate that far into the Federation. Or could they?

Corban knew that they could, and he knew that his people would be crushingly defeated. Oh, they would fight. They would fight valiantly, and for all their superhuman powers the Dornirians would know they'd been in a war. But to what purpose? The human race would suffer whatever fate the Dornirians had planned for it.

And Paul Corban was responsible, and there was nothing he could do. Nothing.

"Eventually," he would say, staring up at the stars, and wondering what battles might be flaming that instant, "Eventually I shall go mad." But he remained tortuously sane.

He was barely conscious of the slow seepage of time. Day trailed relentlessly after night, and the monotonous succession of days and nights came to mean little to him. He slept only when exhaustion overpowered his weakened body and the sharp remorse of his thoughts. He slept until he awoke, and he remained

awake until he slept. How long had he been a prisoner? Months? Years? It no longer mattered, and he ceased caring.

One night he awoke suddenly from a feverish, exhausting sleep and found Doctor Alir standing beside his bed. He looked up at her wonderingly, closed his eyes, opened them again. He was not dreaming. She was real, and—she had changed. Her haggard face had an unnatural pallor. She looked down at him, and took a step closer as he pushed himself to a sitting position.

"They're taking you away," she announced.

"Oh," Corban said. "Well—does it matter?"

Long afterwards he remembered the pain that touched her face, the way she blinked her eyes, and caught her breath sharply, and staggered backwards. He remembered, and wondered if, perhaps, it did matter.

"They're taking you away," she said again. "They're taking you to . . ."

He watched and waited, but she did not finish. She turned away from him, her hands pressed tightly against her face, muffling her words. "Good-bye," she said. "I'm sorry. You must believe that. And—good-bye."

She was gone.

It was still night when they came for him. There seemed to be a touch of mystery in their whisking him away into the darkness. Otherwise, his departure was merely the reverse of

his arrival, except that his two attendants wore scarlet clothing. There was the ride in the ground car, the imperceptible teleporting through the long series of high-domed, circular stations that now had a dreary, night-time emptiness, and finally they stood before a gate. Corban assumed that it was a gate, in a wall, though he could see neither. A uniformed guard passed them through, and Corban was instantly teleported by his attendants to his room.

It reminded Corban of his hospital room, except that this room was larger and its dim light was faintly red. But it was a six-sided cell, with a bathroom and, around the ceiling, a grill-work. Near one wall was the base plate for the invisible bed.

One of the attendants touched his arm, and gestured. Puzzled, Corban watched his antics blankly until he understood. They wanted his clothing. He undressed, and they took his garments and vanished.

Corban's only feeling was one of overwhelming weariness. He slumped onto the bed, and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 15

HE WAS awakened abruptly, by someone screaming into his ear. He leaped from the bed and found himself face-to-face with a woman. Like himself she was nude. She stared at him dully. Her hair was a tangled, drooping mess, her eyes vacant,

her face oddly expressionless. Corban was too dumbfounded to move, or even speak, and the woman continued to stare and made no sound.

A man flashed into the room, a nude man, who spun around awkwardly, uttered a guttural grunt, and leaped towards the woman. She screamed again, and vanished. The man also vanished, without a glance at Corban. Corban sat down heavily.

Seconds later they were back, the man intent in his pursuit of the woman, the woman interested only in staring at Corban. They passed through the room several times, and when they finally failed to reappear Corban got to his feet with a shudder coursing through him.

He examined the room. The walls were solid, and there was no exit. "Only a teleport could get out," he mused. But the man and woman—who must be fellow patients, or inmates, or whatever, because they were nude like Corban—were teleports. Then this place was unlike the *Raxtinu*, where only the officials were able to practice teleportation.

The woman returned. She stood guilelessly in the center of the room and gazed at Corban with such unabashed admiration that he lost his feeling of disgust and became amused. He sat down on the bed again, and looked back at her levelly. She showed no embarrassment, and Corban continued to look at her, wondering how long the strange

impasse might continue. Then the man returned.

He landed soundlessly behind the woman, seized her roughly, and jerked her backwards. Corban was on his feet in an instant. He sprang forward and smashed his fist into the man's face. As he crumpled to the floor, the woman uttered a sharp cry and advanced on Corban boldly.

Corban backed away in alarm, which seemed to confuse her. She halted, and watched him retreat to the far corner of the room. The man regained consciousness, got dazedly to his feet, and disappeared. He returned almost at once, followed by a woman and another man. Others arrived singly or in pairs, nude adults of both sexes, until the room was crowded and Corban stood with his back to the wall facing a belligerent mob.

Some produced unintelligible grunts and shouts and screams, and others only glared angrily, or made child-like mocking faces at him, or gestured threateningly. Suddenly they rushed him.

Corban braced against the wall, and hurled himself forward. He smashed brutally at the hate-filled faces, saw one man go down, and then another. An arm clutched at his throat, and he seized it and felt it snap. They had gotten behind him, hurling themselves on his back. He crouched, flung one over his head, and observed indifferently that it was a woman. A man

swung a wild, killing blow at his head, and Corban ducked, gave him a knee in the groin.

But he was decisively outnumbered. From behind him hands closed on his throat. He clutched at them, seized a finger and broke it, but the hands would not relax. A fist crashed against his forehead. Flailing hands scratched and tore and pounded at him as he went down.

Suddenly he was released. The room filled with red-suited attendants, and as they arrived those of his assailants who were conscious fled. The attendants indifferently teleported the others away. A man in the light-blue uniform of a doctor arrived and gave Corban's scratches and bruises a quick examination and cursory treatment. Then he was alone, except for the woman he had seen first. She crouched in a corner, and her dumbly admiring eyes never left him.

Corban flung himself onto the bed. He had been a fool, he thought, to fight back. Supposing they had killed him? Death might be even preferable to madness.

Madness. These blabbering, face-making nudes were assuredly mad, and yet—they were superhumans. They teleported themselves, they probably spoke, if they spoke at all, telepathically, since all of their verbal utterances had been incoherent. Telekinesis? Probably, but it didn't really matter. There was nothing about the place that

could be moved, mentally or otherwise.

He lost himself in thought, groping for an explanation.

In the *Raxtinu* his fellow inmates had been normal in all respects except for the lack of the Dornirian superpowers of mentality. Here the inmates had those powers, and were totally irrational. He had thought the *Raxtinu* an insane asylum, and he had been wrong. There the inmates had been normal beings in a supernormal world. That made them subnormal, but they were not insane.

But in any vast civilization the odds were that a certain percentage of the population would be mentally unbalanced. Truly insane. And an intelligent people would recognize their insanity as such, and provide for them in some way.

This was their asylum. Corban was confined with Dornir's insane superhumans.

The woman continued to watch him. Corban looked at her absently, and it occurred to him that he had been awake for a long time without food. A chilling thought occurred to him. The inmates of this place came and went at will. Perhaps food was not delivered to the rooms. Perhaps they had to go for it themselves. If that were true, Corban would starve. Only a teleport could leave or enter this room. And though the thought of death was not discomfiting, he wanted it to come, if it came,

through some agent that worked faster and less distressingly than starvation.

He walked towards the woman, and as she looked up at him hopefully he pointed to his mouth. He had little hope of making her understand anything, but after a moment a smile lit her face. She danced about him recklessly, her movements impulsive, her expression radiant. Then she disappeared.

She returned with a man in the uniform of a doctor. He opened an instrument bag, and to Corban's amazement began to examine his teeth. Corban patiently explained that he was hungry. The doctor choked off his startled protests, and continued with the examination. Satisfied with the soundness of Corban's dental equipment, he contemptuously shrugged off his questions about food, and vanished.

Corban tried the woman again, pointing to his mouth and making the motions of eating. This time the woman did understand. She brought food, wrapped in a flimsy, fabric-like napkin.

"Of course," Corban told himself, attacking it hungrily. "No dishes, or trays, or tableware, or anything else that the inmates could use to harm themselves or each other. Not even any clothing."

His reverie was interrupted. The woman was back again, with more food. She continued to bring food, in spite of his spoken and gesticulated protests,

until the floor was littered with the small, napkin-enclosed parcels. When he had eaten, and finally made her understand that he wanted no more, she cheerfully removed them one at a time, and then she returned to crouch in a corner. There she remained. She was there when he went to sleep, and she was there when he awakened hours later.

Day and night were meaningless in the constant, dim red light of the room, but Corban estimated that several days passed before any of the other inmates returned. Then they began to come singly, flashing into the room, looking at him curiously, and disappearing. If they showed any sign of lingering, a glance from him brought a prompt departure.

"That fight gave me a reputation," Corban told himself.

But in time they gained confidence. They came in greater numbers, until they seemed to be descending upon him with the force of a legendary plague of insects. Their attitude changed from hesitant curiosity to bold mockery. They taunted him. They pinched and jostled him when they found him sleeping. They snatched food from his hands when he was eating. If he made a threatening gesture, they simply disappeared, or teleported themselves across the room, out of reach. Through it all the woman who had established herself as his custodian—or in his custody, he couldn't de-

cide which—sat on the floor and watched blankly.

His helplessness infuriated him. He could not possibly elude them. His room was his prison, from which escape was impossible, and yet they entered and left at will. He took to lunging savagely at his tormentors, to striking blows which seldom landed. With a sinister cunning he sat for hours on his bed, watching the manner in which they appeared and plotting a technique that would catch them before they could orientate themselves. But while he was momentarily trapping one, half-a-dozen more would arrive, to leer at him, and babble inarticulate jeers, and strike or kick him from the rear. Sleep became impossible.

Corban began to rage like a caged animal. When he managed to stun one man temporarily, he flung himself onto him and beat his unconscious body to a bloody pulp before the attendants arrived to drag him off.

"Keep them out of here!" Corban shouted. "Keep them out, or I'll kill all of them!"

The attendants ignored his raving. The inmates were wary, for a time, but their maliciousness intensified. Corban began to realize that his faithful servant was having difficulty getting food to him. They were taking it away from her before she reached his room.

"It isn't any use," Corban told himself finally. "I went at

it the wrong way. I should have tried to ignore them."

He was desperately tired. He was eating little, since the food the woman brought to him was often snatched from his hands before he could eat it. He sat on the edge of his bed, and buried his face in his hands, and resolved to let them do their worst.

In a short time there was a mob around him, pushing at him, and pulling, trying to drag him from the bed, pinching, scratching, kicking. He suffered in impassive silence, keeping his eyes on the floor so that they could not read the defeat in his face.

Suddenly the light-blue uniform of a doctor flashed into the room. The inmates fled immediately. Corban was too weary to look up as the doctor approached him. His arm was gripped firmly, and the room dropped away from him. The last thing he saw was the nude woman seated on the floor against the opposite wall, her pouting, childish, almost-pretty face hunched forward over her flabby, middle-aged body.

He was in a dark place, too dark to see. It was permeated with the pungent smell of earth, of strange herbs, of flowers. Clothing was thrust into his hands.

A softly musical voice said, "Put this on. Quickly."

"Doctor Alir!" he gasped.

"I could not leave you in that place," she said simply.

## CHAPTER 16

SHE opened the door a crack, so he would have enough light to put the clothing on properly. He hesitated when he saw that the garments were the official light blue of the medical profession. But she said nothing, so he put them on.

They were in a small out-building, a storage place for gardening equipment. It was dusk outside. In the distance Corban could see a sprawling building, surrounded by some sort of formal garden, with zig-zagging walks and crowds of flowers turning pale blossoms towards the setting sun. The graceful form of the building was almost lovely in the fading light. It was, Corban thought, a quiet-looking madhouse.

When he was dressed she opened the door wider, scrutinized him with care, and gave him a pert nod of satisfaction. "There is only one way to pass the barrier," she whispered. "The guard must pass us through. He must think we are two doctors. Just do as I do. When I step forward, walk beside me. Once we are outside there will be no danger. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he said. He understood perfectly. The danger, the risk, were hers. If they were caught he would be taken back inside, certainly no worse off than he had been before. She was risking everything.

She took his arm. He had no



sensation of movement, but they stood before the invisible gate he had passed through when he arrived. He experienced a momentary curiosity. The barrier was necessary, of course, to keep the teleporting inmates from escaping, but a barrier that would contain a teleport must be a miraculous thing. He wondered how it worked.

The guard gave them the most casual of glances, and jerked at a lever. As Doctor Alir stepped forward he walked beside her. Then they were beyond the barrier, and the peaceful countryside stretched invitingly before them.

"Now," she whispered, tightening her grip on his arm, and they made their first jump.

As the night deepened they made jump after jump, and each darkness-shrouded landing place looked the same to Corban. He did not know whether these teleported changes covered yards or miles, but he knew they were moving away from the torment of the asylum. He knew that when they reached their destination he could sleep, and for the moment that was all he wanted.

Their first jumps went very smoothly, and then it became obvious that Doctor Alir was tiring. Corban remembered the two husky attendants who had transported him to and from the *Raxtinu*, and he had no doubt that moving his body imposed a tremendous mental strain on a young woman who seemed no more than a girl. As the pauses

between jumps became longer Corban had time to look around and speculate on his whereabouts. Invariably they landed in open fields or patches of woods. Occasionally lights glowed in the distances, but never close by.

Then her grip would tighten again, and she would say, "ready?" and they would be off.

"She must have planned this carefully," he thought. "She must have come this way before, or she wouldn't know where she was going."

The sky was gray with the first light of dawn when they reached a lovely forest clearing and a small rustic cottage. Unlike any building Corban had seen on this planet, it was constructed of wood. He turned to Doctor Alir.

"You will be safe here," she said. "There is food. I must return at once. If I am not at the hospital at dawn, they might be suspicious."

He glanced quickly at the sky. She gave him a tired smile, and said, "I can go much faster alone. I will return tonight, and we will go the rest of the way. Few people ever come here, but it might be best if you remained inside."

She was gone. Corban wearily entered the house, found a bed, and slid easily into the first sound sleep he had enjoyed in months. It was dark again when he awakened. He lay staring at the window for a long time be-

fore he realized that he had slept through the day. He went looking for the food she had mentioned, and ate hungrily. Then he made himself comfortable and waited for her.

And she did not come. He paced the floor through the long hours of darkness, and his impatience gradually changed to alarm. The sky lightened, the dawn came freshly to the forest, and his hopes faded. He knew that the worst had happened. Her part in his escape was discovered. Thinking backwards, he wondered how it could have been otherwise, since she had boldly escorted him through the barrier. The guard had only to remember that Doctor Alir had passed through with a strange doctor, and then no one with an iota of intelligence could have any doubt as to what had happened.

She had sacrificed herself to give him his freedom, and as he looked dejectedly about the small house he wondered what he had gained. The food would last only a few days. He did not know where he was, or how close he might be to a human habitation. The first Dornirian he met would find his mind a telepathic blank and recognize him as some kind of degenerate. If he survived the violent prejudices of the populace he would at best end up at the *Raxtinu*—or another institution just like it. And the chances were that the entire planet had been alerted by his escape, and he would be quickly returned to

the insane asylum. Doctor Alir's noble gesture had been in vane.

But he could make a fight of it. "If she is suspected," he mused, "and if this place belongs to her, or has any connection with her, then I must not leave any evidence that I have been here. On the other hand, I must remain close by, because she might return, sooner or later, or send someone, and that is my only hope."

A short time later, with as much food and water as he could carry, he moved off into the forest. He wanted a tree which offered comfort, concealment, and a view of the house, and eventually he found one. He fashioned a place for himself in its upper branches, and rested there peacefully through the day, feeling neither lonely nor bored. The chaos of the asylum was much too vivid in his mind for him to be distressed by solitude. At night he descended, and found a sheltered place near the cottage.

On the third day a company of soldiers came. Their sudden appearance in the clearing startled him, but he watched them unmolested from his tree. They searched the house quickly and disappeared, showing no interest in the surrounding forest.

On the seventh night, when his food was exhausted and he was despairingly attempting to plan for the future, Doctor Alir returned. He did not recognize her at first. She was only a dark

shadow, that came from nowhere and ran frantically towards the house. Lights flashed on, and she raced from room to room, calling, "Paul! Paul!"

He hurried in to her, and she fell sobbing into his arms. But she recovered quickly, and greeted him with a smile. "I was afraid for you," she said.

"I was afraid for you," he told her. He described how he had passed the time waiting for her, and the visit of the soldiers, and she nodded gravely and told him he was very wise.

"We can go, now," she said.

"Could we talk first?" he asked her.

"Only a little. We must go far."

"What happened to you?"

"They thought I had helped you escape," she said. "I knew they might suspect me a little, but they—they imprisoned me, and questioned me, and I did not expect that."

"The guard would remember," Corban said. "We should have disguised you. I would have suggested it, but I didn't know what we were going to do."

"There was so little time," she said. "I did not know when they would miss you, and we had to be past the barrier by then. And I thought the guard would be confused. I had already left earlier, with a friend, when another guard was on duty. Then I returned in a supply caravan, so that no one noticed me."

"I understand," Corban said. "The other guard had seen you

leave, and no one had seen you return, so it couldn't have been you leaving a second time."

"The caravans are not examined closely when they enter the barrier. But though it was dark, the guard was certain he recognized me. So they imprisoned me, and they even searched places I might have taken you. This house belongs to my brother, but I sometimes come here to study, so they sent men to search.

"When they found nothing, they released me with apologies. They agreed, finally, that it could not have been me, because I had already left. And there are many doctors who practice there, or who come to observe. At present they have decided that you are dead."

"I hope the thought gives them pleasure!"

"It will not, unless they find your body. But the other patients hated you. It was because they sensed that you were different, I think, and the authorities now are certain that the other patients have killed you and hidden your body somewhere inside the barrier."

"Doctor Alir," Corban said, "why was I taken there?"

She sat down, and motioned for him to come and sit beside her. "I will take the time to tell you this," she said. "Our peoples are at war."

"I know."

"At the beginning, my people had noble motives. They were

going to conquer your people quickly, without harming them at all, if they could. And they were going to cure them."

"Cure them? You mean . . ."

"Yes. As we attempted to cure you."

"You know what they really intended," Corban said bitterly. "Your people knew that the attempt to cure me had failed. They must have known that they could not expect better results with the remainder of my people. What they really intended was to imprison them, all of them, as they imprisoned me."

Doctor Alir buried her face in her hands. "It was wrong. It was and is. But our leaders said it was our duty to attempt to make your people normal. And at first it seemed to work out as they wanted it. Your people was taken by surprise, and there was almost no fighting. All the doctors that could be spared were sent to work with the prisoners. And then your people began to fight back, and it was terrible." She shuddered, and hunched forward. "Do you know a world your people call Willar?"

"I've heard of it, yes."

"It was there that your people began to fight. One of our armies after another was destroyed. My father, who was a general, died there. And my younger brother."

He took her hand, and stroked it gently. "I understand the grief you feel. I have been wondering what has happened to my

brothers, and sister, and parents."

"Your people had only a small army on Willar, and though we were finally victorious, the cost was horrifying. And then, not long after that, half of our fleet was destroyed in one battle. Our people do not know these things, even yet. The Council has not dared to tell them. They think we are winning easy and glorious victories. But my elder brother is an assistant minister, and he has told me."

Corban felt dazed. "You mean—my people are actually winning?"

"No," she said sadly. "No one wins a war such as this one. But your people are being defeated. Everywhere. And the war has changed. After the horrible victories your people won, it was decided that they were not human, and never could be. There was no longer any thought of curing them. They must be confined or exterminated. Our soldiers are killing your people whenever they can—even the women and children. They no longer try to fight your soldiers. They are afraid to do that. They just try to starve them, and they kill them when they try to surrender. It is madness. It is my people who are insane, not yours. And my brother, the assistant minister, feels that a people as resourceful as yours can never be entirely defeated. Some will survive, and they will never forget what my people have done. They will find our worlds, some

day, and exact terrible reparations."

"But the other ministers do not agree with him?" Corban asked.

"They think only of hating and killing."

She sobbed brokenly. "I caused it. If I had not told you to tell your story, there would have been no war."

"No," Corban said softly. "The fault was mine."

"It was when they decided that your people were not human—were no more than vicious animals—that they had you removed to the asylum."

For a time they sat in silence, side-by-side. He slipped his arm around her, and for a moment she rested her head on his shoulder. Then she jerked away, and got to her feet. "If together we caused this war," she said, "together we must stop it."

Corban laughed. "Just like that? Fine. You tell me what to do, and I'll hurry out and stop it."

She gazed at him wonderingly. "But don't you understand? You are the only one who can stop it."

"What do you want me to do? Go to my people and tell them to stop fighting and surrender? They'd shoot me for a traitor, and go right on fighting."

"Have you forgotten why the war started? We were going to cure your people. Our leaders have lost sight of that, now. We must remind them of it. We must show that in fighting your

people, we are really fighting ourselves."

"How?"

"We must show that your people can be cured—by curing you."

"You mean — arruclam, and cilloclam, and . . ."

"You must master them," she said earnestly. "You must. And when you do, we can stop the war."

## CHAPTER 17

IN CORBAN'S left hand he held a balloon; in his right hand, a gadget whose function approximated that of a stop-watch. He leaned over the edge of the balcony, released the balloon, and simultaneously squeezed the gadget. The balloon floated slowly downwards.

Corban watched it almost indifferently. How does one go about exercising mental control over an object? Does one think words at it, such as— "Slow down, damn you! Stop in mid-air. Come back up here." Or does one assume that the object is on a kind of mental fishline, which responds to the slightest movement of the head? Or is it an identification of self with object—empathy, that was the word—so that . . .

He did not know. Not even Doctor Alir was able to tell him. To her it was instinctive, he thought. She was not conscious of an exertion of mental force. She wanted something to move, and it moved.

The balloon touched the floor. Corban squeezed his gadget. "Seven, fourteen," he said. "Control."

"Control," a voice below him repeated. The woman recorded the figures, and looked up with a smile. It was Doctor Alir's mother, Alira, silvery-haired but lovely as her daughter, and a doctor herself with years of experience with mental problems. Corban's people had killed her husband and younger son, and she greeted him like a long-lost, dearly loved kinsman, called him her dear boy, and took over his education with a resourcefulness and energy that left Corban dazzled.

Corban leaned back, and looked at the table at his side. A small, pencil-like tube lay on its polished surface. So easily and so smoothly did it roll that Corban could send it the length of the table by breathing on it. But with his mind he could not create a ripple of disturbance in its damning inertness. He remembered a game he had played as a boy, with cylinders of metal and a magnet. One pole of the magnet had chased the cylinders along a smooth surface; the other pole had attracted them. He had wondered if the force of telekinesis might be somehow likened to the force of magnetism, and Doctor Alir and her mother had received that suggestion with consternation.

Alira appeared on the balcony beside him. "Supposing you try

phase two for awhile," she said. "It will be more pleasant for you in the garden."

She left him in the garden. He stood for a moment looking at this graceful ancestral home of Doctor Alir's, and thinking what a marvelously convenient thing teleportation was for an architect. Rooms could be planned without doors, upper stories added without wastefully allotting space to stairways, and the distance from kitchen to dining room was not even a factor worth considering. Corban believed he could have enjoyed this Dornirian civilization, if he could have been a part of it.

But he had to remind himself quickly that few of its people would be as kind and as generous as Doctor Alir and her mother.

Phase two. Teleportation. The frustrating memory of his days in the hospital came back to him as he stood on a low ledge and attempted to teleport himself to the ground. It was a simple assignment—move a few inches forward and a few inches down. He closed his eyes, and his mind pleaded futilely with his immobile body.

When he opened his eyes Doctor Alir stood beside him, watching him with detached professional interest. She had returned to the *Raxtinu* after his escape, and on the few times he had seen her her manner had been coldly distant. "Try again," she suggested.

Absently he gestured, palms

up. "It doesn't seem to be any use. I keep trying one phase after another, and nothing ever happens."

"Don't be so cowardly about it!"

He looked up, startled. Her face was pale, her eyes flashing, her hands clenched and trembling. "You're having a nice rest here, aren't you?" she said bitterly. "You've forgotten all about the war. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be worrying about how difficult it is. You'd be determined to succeed."

He stepped forward, flushed with anger. "It's easy enough for you to talk about success, when you've always been able to do it."

"You don't have to shout at me. If you're only able to express yourself with uncouth sounds, you might at least try to speak softly."

"Uncouth sounds!" he roared. "Listen. I caused this war. Every casualty on either side is blood on my hands. Do you think I can keep that on my mind every minute and stay sane?"

As he was speaking, Alira appeared. He allowed his voice to trail away while mother and daughter stood looking at each other, talking telepathically, he supposed, and from their expression having a heated argument. Doctor Alir disappeared.

"Poor Alir," Alira murmured. "And poor Paul." She placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "She loves you, you know.

Just as you love her. Oh, I know all about it—it's perfectly obvious. She loves you and she knows you can never live in safety on this world, and if that weren't enough there's the war you two are blaming yourselves for. The poor girl is worrying herself frantic. And just to make things worse, the investigation of your escape is still going on, and Alir has been summoned to appear before the Council. Alir is afraid some rumor of your presence here may have gotten around. She thinks the servants may have been indiscreet."

"They're still looking for me, I suppose," Corban said.

"The entire Home Guard is searching. I wouldn't have thought you were that important, but the Council seems to want you pretty badly."

"Perhaps it would be best if I just gave myself up. All this work isn't accomplishing anything, and I might cause trouble for you."

"Now don't you worry about that. The important thing is to keep trying. Try as hard as you can. We really must end this war."

"I know. But it isn't pleasant to think that it all depends on my doing the . . . the . . ."

He was about to say, "impossible," but the memory of Doctor Alir's sudden outburst silenced him.

"You must keep trying, and we'll keep trying, too, to think of some new approach." She



looked at him thoughtfully. "Sometimes a sudden shock is effective."

"Not in my case," Corban said dryly. "I had a rather sudden shock when I landed here."

"I wasn't necessarily referring to a physical shock. I personally believe our medical practice tends to err, there. A mental shock might have a more direct effect on the mental processes."

"I've had a few of those, too."

"Yes," she said softly. "I'm sure you have. And it isn't easy to manufacture a mental shock. I must think about it."

Corban stepped back onto the ledge. "Shall I stay on phase two?"

"Yes. Please do." She disappeared, appeared again. "After Alir sees the Council," she said, "she won't be coming back here again. Her presence here seems to disturb both of you."

Corban nodded. The Council. That was the mysterious entity that wanted him badly. He was going to ask Alira if the Council wanted him dead or alive, but she had gone. He sighed, and closed his eyes. Doctor Alir loved him. Her mother thought so, and her mother should know. But somehow it made no difference—no difference at all.

Phase two. Teleportation.

When it seemed that his mind would burst from the effort he exerted, he left the garden and strolled off across the estate. At one time it had been a farm, but Doctor Alir's family had long

since lost interest in farming. So now there were meadows of long, sweet-smelling, flower-crowned grass, and small patches of woods. There was a lazily-flowing brook that Corban crossed on stepping stones—stepping stones that he had placed there himself, since no previous resident of the estate had needed stones to cross the brook.

He crossed the meadow and leisurely climbed a hump in the landscape which was not exactly a hill, but which permitted him to look for some distance over the flat countryside. The circular mansion and its three out-buildings were dreamily peaceful in the warm morning sunlight. A short distance away was the scar that remained from another building—a barn, he supposed, back in the days when the estate had been a farm.

"In a way," he mused, "the Dornirians are people just like us. They can be kind and generous, and they can be cruel and selfish. They can be good and bad, and strong and weak, and there are things they love and things they hate."

His thoughts turned to himself. He could not remain there indefinitely, attempting to call into action a mental endowment which he did not have. It was like training a color-blind man to see colors. He could work and strain, and all kinds of exercises might be designed to help him, but no matter how frequently and in what manner colors were

pointed out to him, he would never properly distinguish them. And medical science was powerless to help him.

Corban was equally helpless to teleport, and all the rest. The powers were not latent within him, as Doctor Alir and her mother assumed. They were lacking entirely. If the fate of his people depended upon his mastering those powers, his people were doomed.

His own future seemed equally bleak. Even if he evaded the authorities, if Doctor Alir provided him with a sanctuary for the rest of his life, he would always be a prisoner—the prisoner of his own body, among superhumans who had transcended their bodies. If Doctor Alir loved him, as he loved her—but that made no difference. Love could not bloom and survive under such circumstances.

"If I could escape," he thought, "if I could get back—back to wherever the war is going on . . ."

He would welcome the chance to die for a cause, to go down fighting in this war which he had started. He owed that to his people, but even an honorable death was denied him.

He sighed, and looked again at the mansion, and the unbroken fields beyond. There were no roads in this Dornirian civilization. The only one he had ever seen was the one that led to the *Raxtinu*, and he had long pondered the significance of that one. He decided that ground cars

were utilized for all comings and goings, so that the inmates would not be given to speculation on their own mental deficiencies.

As he looked, Alira arrived in the garden at the place where he had been practicing phase two. Unlike Doctor Alir, she affected many shades of clothing, and today she wore a flashing yellow. She was a vivid figure as she stood motionless for a moment in the garden, and then appeared in turn by each of the three outbuildings.

"Looking for me," Corban thought. Seated as he was, among the trees, he was invisible to her. "I suppose I ought to start back."

She disappeared, and he had just gotten to his feet when the first soldiers arrived. There was a company, at least, in front of the house, and as he blinked and instinctively ducked back into the trees they were everywhere, surrounding the house, searching the outbuildings.

Corban turned and fled blindly. It required no process of reasoning for him to decide that they were after him. He knew, and he ran for his life, ran through the patch of trees and down the slope across a meadow towards a larger wood beyond.

As he ran, he realized that running could not save him. In seconds they would be all over the countryside. They might even be there waiting for him when he reached the trees, wait-

ing and laughing as he frantically churned his legs to escape. His only hope was to hide.

He reached the trees, and flung himself panting to the ground. Looking back, he saw the flash of their green uniforms among the trees he had just left. They were searching, and in an instant they would be searching here. He glanced upwards. He had saved himself once, by hiding in a tree. Perhaps the Dornirian mentality could not conceive of a mental cripple climbing trees. He scrambled to his feet and ran again, deeper into the wood.

He was half-way up a tall tree when the first green uniforms appeared below him. The foliage about him was scanty, and he looked longingly at the thick leaves ten feet above him. But he dared not climb further. He eased himself into a sitting position on a branch, and waited.

The soldiers moved about noisily, kicking aside the undergrowth, and finally forming a line that moved forward in a relentless, systematic search. Corban's pounding heart relaxed slightly as they moved off and out of sight, but a short time later he heard them returning. Had they seen him entering this wood, or were they searching as thoroughly everywhere?

They had passed beneath his tree once more, and Corban, flattened against the trunk, clinging fervently to his branch,

thought himself safe. Then one of them turned, and looked up.

Blank astonishment crossed the soldier's face. In the same instant the others turned and looked. Their numbers doubled and tripled in an instant, and weapons were raised.

"What a hell of a way to die," Corban thought dully.

Something jerked at him, unbalanced him, hauled at him savagely. He tightened his grip until his white, perspiring hands shed blood on sharp protrusions of bark, and still that unseen force grappled with him. "Telekinesis," he moaned. "They're trying to make me fall."

The force relaxed slowly. A soldier stepped forward, moved to the trunk of the tree, and raised a weapon. Corban looked down into the bulging muzzle. The soldier took aim with a slow, deliberate insolence.

"Perhaps it's best this way," Corban thought. "I could never live long enough to make up for the harm I've done."

He could only wonder why he had ever lived at all. He had accomplished nothing good, nothing of value. The small happiness he had tasted he had left light-years away, and almost beyond his memory. His recollections of events recent enough to be recalled vividly were recollections of torment. Had his besieged mind enjoyed any peace among these superhumans?

Yes, he thought. There were moments of peace. The little

grove near the *Raxtinu*, and Doctor Alir sitting beside him studying the birds with the small telescope. He had thought himself tragically unhappy, and certainly as a victim of an unattainable love he had small cause for rejoicing. But there was no war to torture his mind, and no burning sense of guilt to turn his nights into a churning hell of sleeplessness. He'd had peace, then, if not contentment, and if he had a soul to barter he would trade it cheerfully for a chance to return to those days of blank hopelessness. The large-leaved, stately trees, the fluttering, multi-colored birds, the cheerful, rushing water . . .

The soldier was finally satisfied with his aim. Corban, his mind far away in the *Raxtinu* grove, looked down absently and saw a bluish flash.

## CHAPTER 18

HIS first thought was that he had fallen. He lay on the ground, looking up at the large branches that arched high over his head and stirred in a gentle breeze. He felt a weakness, a dizziness that approached nausea, and he was content to rest for a moment, tensing his muscles to see if he had injured himself. A bird sped across his field of vision, a tiny flash of color. There was a sound nearby that he could not place.

"The soldiers!" he thought suddenly.

He dug his fingers into the

fragrant soil, and weakly pushed himself to a sitting position. He was quite alone. It was some minutes before he could steady himself to stand. He turned towards the puzzling sound, and found a small, rushing stream.

Corban reached for a convenient tree trunk, and clung helplessly. "I was in a tree," he said slowly, "and a soldier fired at me. I was up there . . ."

He looked upwards, stared, and slowly comprehended that he had not climbed one of these trees. They were taller, and larger, and their leaves were broader. And there was no undergrowth here.

He staggered away, came at length to the edge of the grove, and stopped. The ground dropped away in a sloping field of grain, great, circular patches of it. In the distance was a sprawling building, and to his left a mound ran along a curving road.

"The *Raxtinu*!" he gasped. He retreated in haste to the depth of the grove, and unsteadily got himself seated by the stream.

"I was in a tree," he mused slowly, "and the soldier shot me." He examined his body for a trace of a wound, and found none. "I must have fallen, but I didn't hurt myself. And they brought me here." He looked about him awesomely. "But why would they bring me here?"

He listened for a time to the hypnotic gurgling of the water. "They wouldn't," he announced confidently. "The Council want-

ed me. They wouldn't bring me here." But he was here. Then . . .

He leaped to his feet in a tingling, soaring sweep of exhilaration. He had come by himself! He had been thinking of this very spot when the gun was fired, and he had come. He was here.

"I'll have to try it again," he exulted. "Right away." But he was too weak, and too bewildered, to concentrate. He tried to sit down again, lost his balance, lost consciousness.

The day was far gone when he awoke. Light had faded in the grove, and when he reached the edge he saw that the shadows were long. He could see distant, black-clothed figures in the park by the building. He wondered if the old man would be there, singing his songs.

"I must do it again," he thought. "I must." He closed his eyes, and clenched his fists until the nails stabbed painfully into his flesh. In an overwhelming surge of mental effort he willed himself back by the stream. He opened his eyes on the field of grain, and the *Raxtinu*, and the distant, black figures. The murmuring stream was somewhere behind him, among the trees. He tried again, and again, as the darkness settled slowly about him and the softly diffused glow from the barrier along the road became visible. When he could try no longer he slumped to the ground and slept.

He awoke with the misty

dawn. His muscles were stiff from the unaccustomed hardness of his bed, but he felt none the less rested and refreshed. He thrust aside his pangs of hunger and sat looking towards the *Raxtinu*. The rising sun burned away the mist, and black-clothed figures appeared to stroll in the park. Corban watched, and thought. When the sun was high in the sky he finally reached a decision. He got to his feet and strode resolutely down the slope.

A strange doctor was no novelty at the *Raxtinu*, and the patients, after a glance at his blue clothing, ignored him. He entered the building boldly, but once inside he moved with extreme caution. He could not risk a telepathic encounter with a staff member. He managed to avoid a female doctor by ducking hastily around a corner, and the precaution of glancing ahead before turning into a corridor saved him from a face-to-face encounter with the Director.

His destination was a door, labeled, "For Authorized Personnel Only." What lay on the other side he could only guess—and hope. He reached it safely, and slipped through.

He was in a long corridor. A black-clothed patient approached, pushing an empty cart. He gave Corban a nod as he passed him. Corban moved along warily. The tempting odors of cooking food wafted in from somewhere, to remind Corban of his hunger. He opened a door, looked in quickly, and closed it.

Down the corridor he went, trying one door after another, and finally he found the door he sought.

The room was lined with shelves, and on the shelves clothing was stacked—the black clothing of the patients. Corban fumbled from shelf to shelf until he found his size. Standing with his back against the door, he hastily discarded his blue doctor's clothing and attired himself in black. Then, after a cautious glance to make certain the corridor was empty, he left the room and hurried away.

He went directly to the administrative offices. A female doctor greeted him with a casual nod that showed no sign of recognition. "May I speak with Doctor Alir?" Corban asked.

"Doctor Alir is not here."

"When is she expected back?"

"She will not be back," the doctor said. "She's been—transferred."

"She's been — transferred?" Corban echoed blankly. The almost imperceptible hesitation in the doctor's voice staggered him. For the first time it occurred to him that the soldiers' presence on Doctor Alir's estate had been no accident, and the fact that they discovered him there, even though he escaped, could have been damning to both Doctor Alir and her mother. "The servants may have been indiscreet," Alira had said. And now Doctor Alir had been—what had they done to her?

"Could I help you?" the doc-

tor said. "Is there anyone else you'd care to talk to?"

Corban turned away. "No, thank you," he muttered, and fled.

The park was cool and restful. Someone had left an invisible chair in a shady spot, and Corban made himself comfortable and looked down towards the stream, where a man and woman were wading and indulging in the delightful nonsense of small children. Corban watched them, and felt an unaccountable surge of jealousy. Strolling patients gave him friendly nods. An attractive young woman, walking some distance away, smiled and beckoned to him. He was back among his own once more, his own kind of people, and the sensation was almost painful. To lose himself among the thousands of black-clad patients, to forget the war, and Doctor Alir, and the asylum, and the nerve-racking therapy, to forget, and live out his life here in peaceful, uncomplicated certainty . . .

But there would be no forgetting. Wearily he got to his feet.

The woman doctor, mildly surprised to see him again, looked at him inquiringly. "I'd like to speak to the Director," Corban said.

The doctor said nothing—to Corban. But a moment later the Director entered the room. He studied Corban thoughtfully, nodded at the doctor, and gestured at Corban. "Come this way," he said. So matter-of-fact

was his manner that Corban wondered if he'd been recognized.

But as soon as they reached his office, the Director turned and pointed a finger. "You," he said, speaking slowly and with great emphasis, "are being most earnestly searched for in every corner of this planet but this one. How did you get here?"

"Where is Doctor Alir?" Corban demanded.

"Yes," the Director said. "There is that." He sat down at his table, and pointed at a chair. Corban remained standing.

"Doctor Alir," the Director said, "is in prison. She confessed her part in your escape. I fear they were somewhat rough with her. Illegal, not to mention immoral, but very effective. Now—how did you get here?"

Corban told him. The Director heard the story twice, and began to ask questions. Just how had Corban felt after his first experience of mentally controlled travel? What sort of sickness did he experience? Why did he wait so long before trying again? Finally—why had he come to see the Director?

"You could have hidden indefinitely in one of the villages," the Director said. "We do not interfere with our patients as long as they behave themselves."

"I want some more therapy," Corban said. "I want to be completely cured. I mean—I want to be cured as you and your people look at my condition. Then I want to go before your rulers

and try to stop the war. And I want to get Doctor Alir released, if it's possible."

"You had therapy before," the Director said. "It didn't work."

"I know. But I also know that I never really expected it to work. That must have contributed to the failure."

The Director leaned forward, cupped his chin with one hand, and thoughtfully tapped the table with his other. Corban, angered by his apparent indifference, took a step forward. "I know that it's my people who are being murdered," he shouted. "But certainly you, of all people, should have some humane feeling. Any doctor should want to stop a war."

The Director blinked, and gazed at him reproachfully. "Certainly I want to stop the war. I'll remind you that it is not only your people who are being killed. And then—the war has done things. To us. Things you might not understand. Things like what happened to Doctor Alir. But it is not merely a matter of wanting to stop it. You're putting it in terms of a medical problem, you see, and we must approach it on a medical basis. The soldier fired just when your mental state had you properly poised, so the shock must have been the determining factor. But what sort of shock? Would you recognize that weapon if you saw it again?"

"I'm certain I would."

"Very well. Have you had any-



thing to eat since you returned? No? I'll assign you to a room, and you are to eat, and get some rest. I'll send for you again when I'm ready for you."

He shrugged off Corban's questions, and sent him away. Corban spent an uneasy two hours, wondering if the Director would betray him before he had a chance to carry out the plan for which Doctor Alir had sacrificed so much. Then the Director came for him himself, and escorted him back to his office. Spread out on the table was a small arsenal of weapons. Corban circled the table, and pointed at a deadly-looking, bulging pistol.

"That one," he said. "It made a kind of bluish spark when it fired."

The Director consulted some notes. "Then it was the one," he noted. He pushed the other weapons aside, picked up the one Corban had chosen, and pointed it at him. "Good. I want you to move yourself back to that grove by mental power. You can't escape from this room any other way. The door is locked. I'm going to pull this trigger—" he snatched a book from the table, and tossed it into the air, "—when that touches the floor. Either you leave, or you get hit." He levelled the gun.

Corban stared dumbly at the book, which spiraled slowly downwards. "Murder!" he gasped, and the Director's smile only broadened.

"If it's possible . . ." Corban

thought. "The grove. The trees. Birds. The brook . . ."

The book touched, and the gun sparked.

Corban was in the grove. He steadied himself against a tree, and was trying to control his nausea when the Director arrived. The Director thumped his chest, checked heart and pulse, and stepped back smiling cheerfully.

"You might have killed me," Corban said.

"My dear patient, that gun is not a killing kind of gun. It merely stuns. It causes a mental paralysis. The effect is probably unknown to your people. The soldiers intended to paralyze you, and lower you safely to the ground. But your mental condition, plus some peculiarity of that particular kind of shock, frustrated them. Shall we return to my office?"

"You mean—"

"But naturally. The same means by which you left it."

Corban strained viciously as the Director looked on, and stroked one cheek with a thoughtful finger, and made soft clucking noises with his tongue. "If we must walk," he said finally, "I suppose we must."

Knowing that the Director could easily have returned him to the office, Corban walked in puzzled silence. But as his dizziness and nausea faded he realized that the walk was good for him—just what he needed. By

the time they reached the building he had completely recovered.

Back in the office, the Director seated himself and picked up the weapon. "This is extremely interesting," he remarked. "To my knowledge, no attempt has ever been made to make therapeutic use of this particular kind of shock. And in its normal use this kind of gun has probably never been fired at a person with your particular—ah—deficiencies. The only difficulty is that with your mind in a state of balance the shock merely provides an impetus. We still know nothing of its lasting effects. So—excuse me, please, but this is necessary." Quickly he raised the gun, and fired.

Unconsciousness crashed down on Corban with the crushing impact of an enormous weight. Then he felt nothing more—nothing, and then a slow, sleepy awareness of a painful tingling in his hands and feet. Groggily he opened his eyes, found himself lying on an invisible bed. He was no longer in the office, but the Director sat nearby, watching him intently.

He became conscious of a new sensation, one that bewildered him. Images prodded restlessly at his mind, but they were strange and shapeless images. The Director placed one of the striped balloons on the floor between them. Corban's mind contemplated it, reached for it, gave it an experimental nudge. The balloon rolled. Corban lift-

ed it a few inches, lost it, and watched it bounce slowly.

"One more dose should cure you completely," the Director said. "Do you feel able to take it?"

"Yes," Corban said.

"There's no hurry. Tomorrow will do."

"Today. Right away. And Doctor Alir must know. Immediately. Will you tell her?"

"I believe I can get word to her. Look, young man. This is a proud moment in medical history. We've never before had a cure with a completely negative case. Never. So no matter what happens, it's a wonderful thing that you've done. I want you to know that, because even with you cured this stopping the war is not going to be easy. The Council is in the hands of some vicious old men, and—you'll see when you appear before them. I might add that you're doing it at your own risk, and it isn't an inconsiderable risk. Do you still want to stop the war?"

Corban gestured at the gun. "Now," he said.

"Now," the Director agreed. He raised the gun, hesitated. "I'm rather glad you feel this way. Doctor Alir sulked around for months under the burden of responsibility for this war, and I assume that you've felt something similar. And the fact of the matter is that I caused it. It was I who called in the government. If I'd had an iota of sense, I'd have made you two youngsters keep things to yourselves.

I thought only of the scientific importance of your presence here, and nothing at all about the political implications. And I'm old enough to know better. Of course there is one other consideration . . ."

He was still talking when he pulled the trigger.

## CHAPTER 19

THE corridor was a long one. A young army officer appeared at the far end, started to walk towards them, thought better of it and appeared beside them. "The Council is assembled," his mind announced.

"We shall join them immediately," the Director's mind replied. He turned to Corban, and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "All right, young man. From here on it's your show."

Corban took the Director's hand, and shook it warmly. It was a puzzling maneuver to a Dornirian accustomed to mental contacts, but the Director seemed to understand. "I wish you good fortune," his mind said.

"Aren't you coming?"

"I am only allowed a place among the observers, unless I am called to testify. And today there are many observers. Shall we go?"

They went. Corban stood at the center of a vast indoor amphitheater, with the thousand councilmen, the rulers of the Dornirian Worlds, arranged in tiers about him. The distant galleries behind them were

jammed with unofficial observers. To Corban's ears the silence was uncanny. To his mind the undulating undertone of mind conversation welled confusedly. Suddenly that, too, was silenced.

On a dais stood the First Councilman, tall, gaunt, white-haired. He wore the green of the Dornirian Army. The tense smile that jerked across his grotesquely wrinkled face served only to underscore his sternness. "Paul Corban?" his mind inquired as clearly as if he'd spoken.

Corban faced him, and delivered the stiff bow he had rehearsed. The next moment he was staggered by an avalanche of thoughts that poured down upon him, thoughts that raged and insulted and accused and threatened. He stood with hands on hips and held his head defiantly erect, but inwardly his uneasiness grew. The Director had warned him that the Council might be hostile, but he had expected nothing like this.

The First Councilman raised both hands, and the onslaught ceased. "Paul Corban," his mind said, "your deceit has plunged two civilizations into war with each other, and resulted in untold cost and suffering. What have you to say for yourself?"

"I have deceived no one," Corban replied.

"You deceived our best medical minds into thinking you were mentally incompetent, and in so certifying you. And yet we all saw how you entered this room,

and we have all heard your mind responding."

Corban kept his thought to himself. "So that's their angle!"

"If you do not call this deceit," the First Councilman went on, "perhaps you would not mind explaining your forthright honesty in this matter."

Silent mental laughter rolled down from the galleries. Angry laughter. Corban waited uneasily for it to stop. "They may think they need a scapegoat," the Director had said. "Be careful they don't make one out of you."

Again a gesture from the First Councilman silenced the tumult of thought. "We await your reply, Paul Corban."

"I came to you as a stranger," Corban said. "I came only because I was lost. My ship crashed and I was severely injured, but your doctors saved my life and were kind to me. They considered me an outcast and treated me as one, but I did not understand that. Because they were kind, I told them about myself and my people. I told them the truth, and in turn they gave that truth to this Council. And this Council made me the betrayer of my people by using that truth in a treacherously conceived war. My people had caused you no harm, or even inconvenience. They did not know of your existence, but you attacked them, and laid waste to their worlds, and murdered their women and children. What have you to say for yourselves?"

The thoughts rolled down again, threatening and taunting. A hideous anger twisted the First Councilman's face, and when he had controlled his rage his thoughts cut sharply across the seething mental confusion. "The Dornirians undertake no wars save in their own defense. We launched a glorious medical crusade to free your people from themselves, and our kindness was met with the foul savagery of unreasoning animals. Naturally we defended ourselves. Naturally!"

"It is a strange kindness that leaves smoking worlds piled high with their dead."

"Enough," the First Councilman said. "Let us hear the evidence on this deceit."

The witnesses were called in a group—doctors from the hospital where Corban had been treated after his crash, Doctor Alir and her mother, the Director, and a miscellany of persons who'd had some passing contact with Corban. The testimony droned on and on as Corban's life among the Dornirians was reconstructed with painstaking thoroughness. Corban scarcely heard it. He kept his eyes on Doctor Alir.

She had lost weight. Her face was pale and devoid of expression. Her manner was listless, and several times she swayed and seemed about to fall. Alira supported her with a firm arm, and from time to time whispered a verbal comment that could not

be intercepted by the sharp minds of the interrogators. One of Doctor Alir's hands was bandaged.

"The devils!" Corban muttered.

Doctor Alir's testimony was indifferent—almost mechanical. It amounted to a full confession as she described her part in smuggling him out of the asylum, and the efforts of her mother and herself to cure him. The Council listened stoically, and made no comment. There were not even any questions. The Director ended the testimony by detailing the steps in Corban's cure.

The First Councilman asked a question. Was it the Director's opinion that the defendant Paul Corban had skilfully feigned his disabilities and likewise feigned the cure at an opportune moment? It was not. The Director was positive that Corban's disabilities had been genuine. He considered the cure to be a medical miracle.

"The Council will take note of the defendant's despicable cleverness," the First Councilman remarked.

The witnesses were dismissed. Corban was asked if he had anything further to say. He scornfully returned the old man's haughty stare.

"I will remind you," he said, "that what has happened to me can also happen to others of my people. I will remind you that those who have fought well against your superior mental

powers may prove invincible when their powers equal yours. I know nothing of the higher beliefs of your people, but among certain of my people there is a saying that an unjust blow travels a full circle. The evil you have unleashed shall return to strike you. I would prevent this, not to save a people who have treated myself and my people cruelly, but to keep two great civilizations from destroying each other."

The old man rose slowly. On his dais he towered over Corban. He raised both hands, as though performing a sacred invocation. "The First Councilman invokes the death penalty," he announced.

Corban took a step backwards. He had come to testify, to give evidence, to try to stop the war. Instead they had conducted a trial, and sentenced him to death. He started to protest, and found himself unable to break the silence—the mental silence—that hung so menacingly over the room.

"So they do need a scapegoat," he thought. "But that may be the best answer. If they can blame the war on me, they can stop it in good conscience after I have been killed. It really might be the best way—if only I could be certain that they would stop it."

The First Councilman spoke again. "Is there a challenge?"

"Challenge!" flashed quickly from all parts of the room. The welter of thoughts that stabbed

and crackled about him dazed Corban. The members of the Council began to change places, to move about in complicated maneuvers as if they were playing some ridiculously complicated child's game. Gradually it dawned upon Corban that he was watching an election—on the proposed death penalty for Paul Corban.

Suddenly the maneuvering stopped. The blur of faces was motionless about him. The thoughts receded into nothingness. The issue had been decided, and though Corban had strained himself to follow the proceedings he had been frustrated by strange and meaningless ceremonial formulas. The verdict had been rendered, and everyone present knew what it was except Corban.

The First Councilman rose again. He stood for a moment with head inclined. Then he bowed quickly to the left and to the right, and disappeared. From the Director's coaching, Corban knew what had happened. The government had fallen. The clique of war rulers was out. And now everything would depend upon the men who succeeded them.

"Please come forward, Paul Corban."

There was another man in the First Councilman's place — a younger man, big and powerful-looking, with flashing eyes and a tight smile. "It is our intention," he announced, "to end the

war immediately. Is there a challenge?"

Challenges came in a snarling deluge. The complicated maneuvering began again, as the fallen government sought to regain its power, but it seemed to Corban that it was less involved and did not last as long. When it was over the First Councilman made the bows, but he kept his place. He addressed the Council.

"We have sought to impose our mores upon an innocent people, and it was not done out of kindness, but out of our own vanity. It shall be our solemn duty to end this folly, and to work together with our brothers, the people of the Galactic Federation, to rebuild what has been destroyed, and to make atonement for our attack where possible. Paul Corban, we wish to ask your help in ending this war. We shall give you a ship captured from your people, so that you may return to them as our envoy."

"There must be satisfactory guarantees of your good faith," Corban said.

"You shall have them."

"I accept."

"Our military leaders will be ordered to stop fighting at once unless attacked, but we have never been able to establish satisfactory communications with your people. Time wasted may mean more lives lost."

"I'm ready to leave at once."

"Shall you go alone, or—" The First Councilman's smile broad-

ened slightly. "—would you prefer that one of our people accompany you?"

Corban thought of the reception he might receive at some besieged military outpost, of the skepticism that would greet his story. "I must have credentials to establish my authority," he said. "And it would probably be helpful if one of your people of suitable rank accompanied me."

"Very well. Doctor Alir?"

She snapped a thought back at him. "I refuse!"

"You want to end the war," she said. "Shall I tell you why? Is it because you are finally convinced that the war was wrong? No. It is because you are cowards. You are afraid. You know that Federation ships have broken through our home defense, and this moment are seeking the home planets. You know that they will exact a horrible revenge if they find them. You know that if you destroy these ships others will come. Paul Corban has shown you that the people of the Federation will some day be our superiors in every respect. The thoughts that he uttered here are prophetic. An unjust blow travels a full circle. In the name of justice, I say let the blow fall. I shall not move to prevent it."

"You are wrong, Alir," Corban told her. "Your people can be punished only at the cost of more suffering by my people. The important thing is to end the war. But I would not want

you to accompany me unwillingly."

Suddenly the Director stood beside them. He placed one hand on Corban's shoulder and the other on Alir's, and drew them close together. "Listen, youngsters," he said. "We have been talking among ourselves about who caused this war. Alir thinks her people should be punished, but she really wants punishment for herself. Don't you realize that this war was inevitable? From the way Paul Corban's Galactic Federation has been expanding, our peoples were bound to clash very soon. It could have happened with no Paul Corban in a *Raxtinu* with a Doctor Alir to take a heroic interest in him and attempt to cure him. And without a cured Paul Corban, who can say what course this war might have taken? It is not those few Federation ships that worry the Council. It is Corban, and the idea that the Federation may have others like him. And Paul—don't worry about Alir coming with you unwillingly. The new First Councilman is her brother. He knows all about you two, and he's on your side."

"Among my people," Corban said, his thoughts halting and embarrassed, "it is considered improper for a man and woman to make a journey together unless they are man and wife."

"That is also the attitude of my people," she answered.

Looking around, Corban saw that the councilmen were stand-



ing. There was a strange man in the center of the room—a tall man, who stood with arms up-lifted, whose calm face commanded attention and respect. His flowing clothing was a pure, dazzling white—the first white clothing Corban had seen among the Dornirians.

His thoughts came to Corban, songful and soaring. "May the Supreme Being bless the events of this day . . ."

A priest.

Corban turned to Alir. Like the others, she stood looking up-

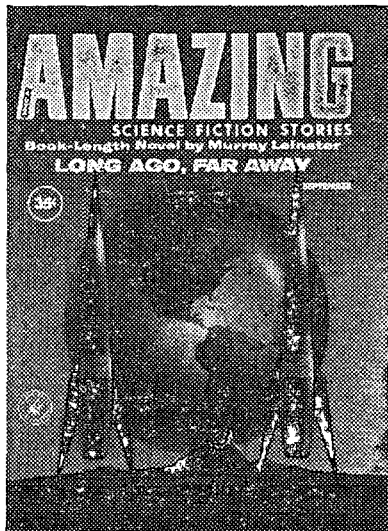
wards. So intent was his admiration of her that part of the prayer escaped him. Then he heard his name.

" . . . Paul Corban, the son-of his people, who has suffered duress and thus found the way to freedom from the physical bonds of his being, who like them has tasted fire, who has been purified as they now may be purified; and Alir, the daughter of our people. Bless them as they go forth together to bring peace to our troubled stars . . ."

**THE END**

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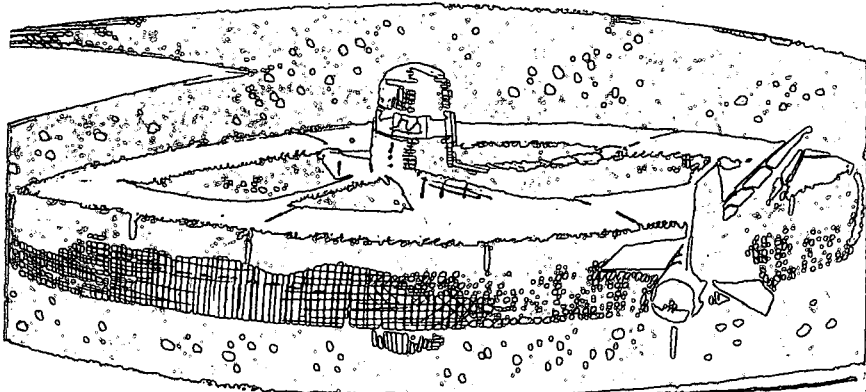
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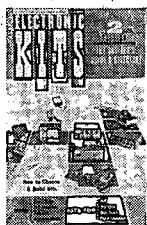
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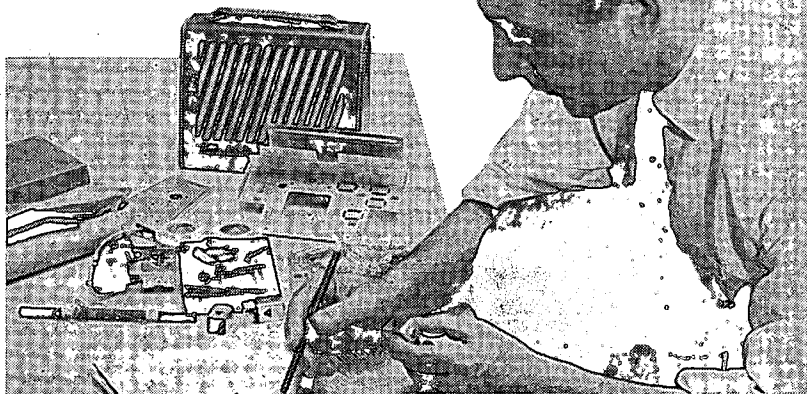
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